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Teachers' experiences in facing the challenges of implementing intercultural education in culturally diverse classrooms

Las experiencias vividas de docentes ante los desafíos de implementar una educación intercultural en aulas culturalmente diversas

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of teachers facing the challenges of implementing intercultural education in classrooms characterized by high cultural diversity. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten elementary school teachers in the Cusco region who work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. The findings reveal five emerging categories: (1) Structural challenges and barriers, evidenced in linguistic difficulties, limited specialized training, and the persistent gap between educational policies and their actual implementation; (2) Intercultural pedagogical practices, which require active listening, continuous adaptation, and a teaching role as cultural mediator; (3) Reconfiguration of prejudices, derived from the often emotionally uncomfortable confrontation with one's own biases and stereotypes; (4) Ambivalent recognition of cultural diversity, experienced simultaneously as a source of pedagogical enrichment and as a space that generates personal tensions; and (5) Personal and professional transformation, where the intercultural experience comprehensively reconfigures the teacher's identity. The conclusions indicate that the implementation of intercultural education transcends methodology, constituting a complex existential process that demands not only technical skills, but also a profound transformation of conceptions, sustained institutional support, and improved structural conditions. This study contributes to the understanding of the often invisible dimensions of intercultural teaching practice and supports the need for educational policies that recognize and comprehensively strengthen professional development in contexts of cultural diversity.

Keywords: intercultural education, teaching experience, cultural diversity.

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como propósito comprender la experiencia vivida por docentes frente a los desafíos de implementar la educación intercultural en aulas caracterizadas por una alta diversidad cultural. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo de orientación fenomenológica y se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a diez docentes de educación básica en la región del Cusco que trabajan con estudiantes provenientes de contextos culturales diversos. Los datos fueron analizados mediante el software MAXQDA. Los hallazgos revelan cinco categorías emergentes: (1) Desafíos y barreras estructurales, evidenciados en las dificultades lingüísticas, la escasa capacitación especializada y la brecha persistente entre las políticas educativas y su aplicación real; (2) Prácticas pedagógicas interculturales, que exigen escucha activa, adaptación continua y un rol docente como mediador cultural; (3) Reconfiguración de prejuicios, derivada de la confrontación, a menudo emocionalmente incómoda, con los propios sesgos y estereotipos; (4) Reconocimiento ambivalente de la diversidad cultural, experimentado simultáneamente como una fuente de enriquecimiento pedagógico y como un espacio generador de tensiones personales; y (5) Transformación personal y profesional, donde la experiencia intercultural reconfigura de forma integral la identidad docente. Las conclusiones indican que la implementación de la educación intercultural trasciende lo metodológico, constituyéndose como un proceso existencial complejo que demanda no solo competencias técnicas, sino también una profunda transformación de concepciones, un acompañamiento institucional sostenido y la mejora de las condiciones estructurales. Este estudio aporta a la comprensión de las dimensiones frecuentemente invisibilizadas de la práctica docente intercultural, y fundamenta la necesidad de políticas educativas que reconozcan y fortalezcan integralmente el desarrollo profesional en contextos de diversidad cultural.

Palabras clave: educación intercultural, experiencia docente, diversidad cultural.

Introduction

In the context of contemporary educational realities, cultural diversity has emerged as one of the most significant and complex issues facing educational institutions globally. Processes of globalization, migration, and the increasing flow of students have transformed classrooms into multicultural spaces where various worldviews, languages, values, and cultural practices converge (Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2025). This reality poses substantial challenges for educators, who find themselves at the forefront of implementing an education that aspires to be genuinely intercultural, equitable, and inclusive.

From a practical perspective, recent studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between educators' international mindset and their intercultural competencies, suggesting that cultivating this mindset can enhance interactions in diverse contexts (Malik et al., 2025). An international mindset entails both cognitive and affective orientations toward global understanding, appreciation of diversity, and the willingness to transcend culturally limited perspectives. Findings indicate that teacher training programs should emphasize the development of this mindset as a fundamental component of preparation for teaching in multicultural settings.

Intercultural education has solidified as a promising educational paradigm aimed at recognizing, respecting, and valuing cultural diversity within school realities. Pacco et al. (2024) argue that this approach seeks to go beyond mere coexistence of multiple cultures, promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, and the transformation of power relations that have historically marginalized certain cultural groups. However, the gap between institutional discourse on interculturality and everyday pedagogical practices remains a persistent issue across various Latin American educational contexts.

In this regard, contemporary intercultural education has transitioned from its traditional conception as an exclusive phenomenon within migratory contexts to a fundamental dimension of education in an increasingly complex and digitized world (Conti, 2025). Intercultural competence, defined as the ability to interact constructively with differences, necessitates a dialogical attitude that is often hindered by entrenched prejudices and essentialist understandings of cultural identity, which simplify identities and reinforce divisions. An intersectional perspective allows for a better understanding of the intricate matrix of power relations that students and educators inhabit, enabling a transformative intercultural education that facilitates dialogue and challenges discriminatory structures.

Educators play a critical and multifaceted role in constructing intercultural educational spaces. As noted by Flores et al. (2024), teachers frequently encounter a variety of challenges when attempting to implement a critical intercultural education, including the need to recognize their own biases and stereotypes, which complicates the creation of truly inclusive environments. The inclusion of students with diverse cultural identities in public schools poses significant challenges for education professionals, particularly in heterogeneous contexts. Díaz-Pacheco et al. (2025) refer to this phenomenon as intercultural emergence, wherein sensitivity to diversity

becomes a key competency for fostering respectful and harmonious coexistence among different cultures through equitable treatment.

Nevertheless, many frontline educators lack adequate preparation and often adopt a weak or deficit perspective instead of an inclusive approach that addresses the multiple challenges stemming from students' cultural needs (Hue & Kennedy, 2025). This deficit perspective tends to view cultural differences as deficiencies that must be compensated, rather than recognizing them as valuable resources that enrich the educational process. Transitioning to a strengths-based and culturally proactive approach requires a profound and holistic transformation in pedagogical conceptions and the professional identity of educators.

Despite the recognized importance of intercultural competencies, significant gaps persist in understanding how educators subjectively experience these challenges in their daily practice. Tovar-Correal et al. (2024) illustrate that interculturally-focused communicative competencies have traditionally been examined from bilingualism and second language acquisition perspectives, highlighting the need to broaden research avenues to explore cultural diversity in educational settings more deeply. Furthermore, Carabalí (2024) emphasizes that, from a critical pedagogy perspective in intercultural contexts, it is imperative to analyze the tensions, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas that educators face while mediating between the various cultures present in the classroom. Teacher training in intercultural competencies emerges as a determining factor for the quality of education in diverse contexts.

Narváez Ismael et al. (2025) caution that challenges such as difficulties in accessing pedagogical strategies, the lack of development of intercultural competencies, and the need for ongoing professional development for both educators and students persist. Martínez et al. (2024) argue that ethno-education and ancestral knowledge must be systematically integrated into educational systems to preserve cultural diversity across various realities; this necessitates that teachers not only develop technical knowledge but also a profound cultural sensitivity and critical reflection on their professional practices.

On the other hand, practical evidence regarding the implementation of intercultural education reveals significant outcomes. A longitudinal study in schools demonstrated that systematic and transformative interventions can promote more inclusive pedagogical practices and respectful intercultural relationships that transcend the school environment and extend into society at large (Elias & Mansouri, 2023). The results indicate key changes in attitudes and behaviors related to interculturality, evidenced over the long term. This suggests that brief interventions yield limited or even negative effects, whereas sustained approaches foster positive and enduring transformations in students' perceptions of cultural diversity.

Although theory has highlighted the importance of intercultural competence, recent studies reveal notable discrepancies in everyday practice. Using virtual reality tools, Dekker et al. (2025) found that teachers rarely recognize multicultural events in the classroom from a cultural perspective, indicating that intercultural sensitivity does not automatically manifest in specific educational contexts. The analysis showed that the complexity of tolerance—particularly the paradox of respecting all cultural perspectives while not tolerating intolerance—constitutes a fundamental challenge for educators, who often lack guidance on how to navigate these ethical tensions.

Complementing these findings, recent research on virtual reality has revealed that educators generally do not identify multicultural events through a cultural lens, and that the paradox of tolerance presents a significant challenge (Dekker-Groen et al., 2025). This issue speaks to the tension between respecting diverse cultural viewpoints and maintaining boundaries against practices that contradict fundamental human rights principles. This paradox places educators in ethically complex situations where they must negotiate between cultural relativism and ethical universalism, often without adequate institutional support.

Despite conceptual advancements in the field of intercultural education, a significant gap exists in phenomenological research that delves deeply into the subjective experiences of educators as they implement practices in intercultural contexts. Gómez and Bobadilla (2024) indicate a discrepancy between the integration of cultural diversity in curricular documents and its effective implementation in the classroom, suggesting that there are dimensions of the teaching experience that remain marginalized and require exploration from the voices of the educators themselves engaged in intercultural education.

In this context, the present study aims to explore, through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, the lived experiences of educators working in contexts characterized by high cultural diversity. This research responds to the need to ground intercultural education training in the real experiences of educators, transcending abstract theoretical prescriptions to construct situated and contextually relevant knowledge that can aid in transforming educational practices toward genuine interculturality.

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that educators encounter when facing the challenges of implementing intercultural education in culturally diverse classrooms, exploring the meanings they construct.

Methodology

This study is structured within a qualitative framework, which emphasizes depth and contextual richness for understanding social phenomena (Lim, 2025). Qualitative research seeks to explore and comprehend phenomena from the viewpoints and meanings individuals attribute to their social world, allowing for nuances of human experience that quantitative approaches may not capture.

Phenomenology is a relevant design within qualitative research as it aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of participants, emphasizing the direct examination of phenomena as perceived by consciousness (Van Manen, 2023). This approach is particularly suitable for studying educators' experiences in intercultural contexts, as it allows for an analysis of how educators experience, interpret, and assign meaning to the challenges of implementing intercultural educational practices in their professional routines.

This research is categorized as basic research since its objective is to generate new knowledge and contribute to existing literature through a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of educators in intercultural contexts, without seeking immediate application of a treatment (CONCYTEC, 2018). Basic research focuses on producing and generating knowledge that enhances the understanding of social and educational phenomena, contributing to theoretical development and supporting existing theories within the field of study.

The data collection technique employed was semi-structured interviews, which allow for the gathering of detailed and precise information about the phenomena of interest—in this case, the experiences and meanings participants construct regarding a specific phenomenon (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This format combines an open-ended question guide with flexibility to delve into emerging aspects during the dialogue, making it well-suited for capturing the richness of lived experiences in phenomenological research.

The instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide composed of six central questions designed to explore the lived experiences of educators facing the challenges of implementing intercultural education in culturally diverse classrooms. The questions were formulated openly to allow participants to narrate their experiences in detail, following the principles of phenomenological interviewing aimed at obtaining rich, contextualized descriptions of their lived experiences (Bevan, 2014). Given the nature of this research, no formal validation of the instrument was conducted, as flexibility is crucial in this approach and allows for adjustments in the question framework, which is an essential methodological feature for capturing authentic meanings from the participants' perspectives.

The population consisted of educators working in educational environments characterized by substantial cultural diversity. The sample was intentionally selected and included 10 educators from an educational institution located in the Cusco region, serving culturally diverse students. The sample size was determined following the principle of theoretical saturation, which is central to phenomenological research, whereby sufficiency is reached when new interviews do not yield substantially different meanings from those already identified (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Data coding and analysis were conducted using MAXQDA software, a specialized tool that facilitates the systematic and rigorous thematic analysis of qualitative data, ensuring credibility and trustworthiness in the analytical process (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). MAXQDA allows for the management, coding, and analysis of various types of qualitative data, facilitating both inductive and deductive coding, as well as the identification of emerging patterns, themes, and relationships within the empirical material.

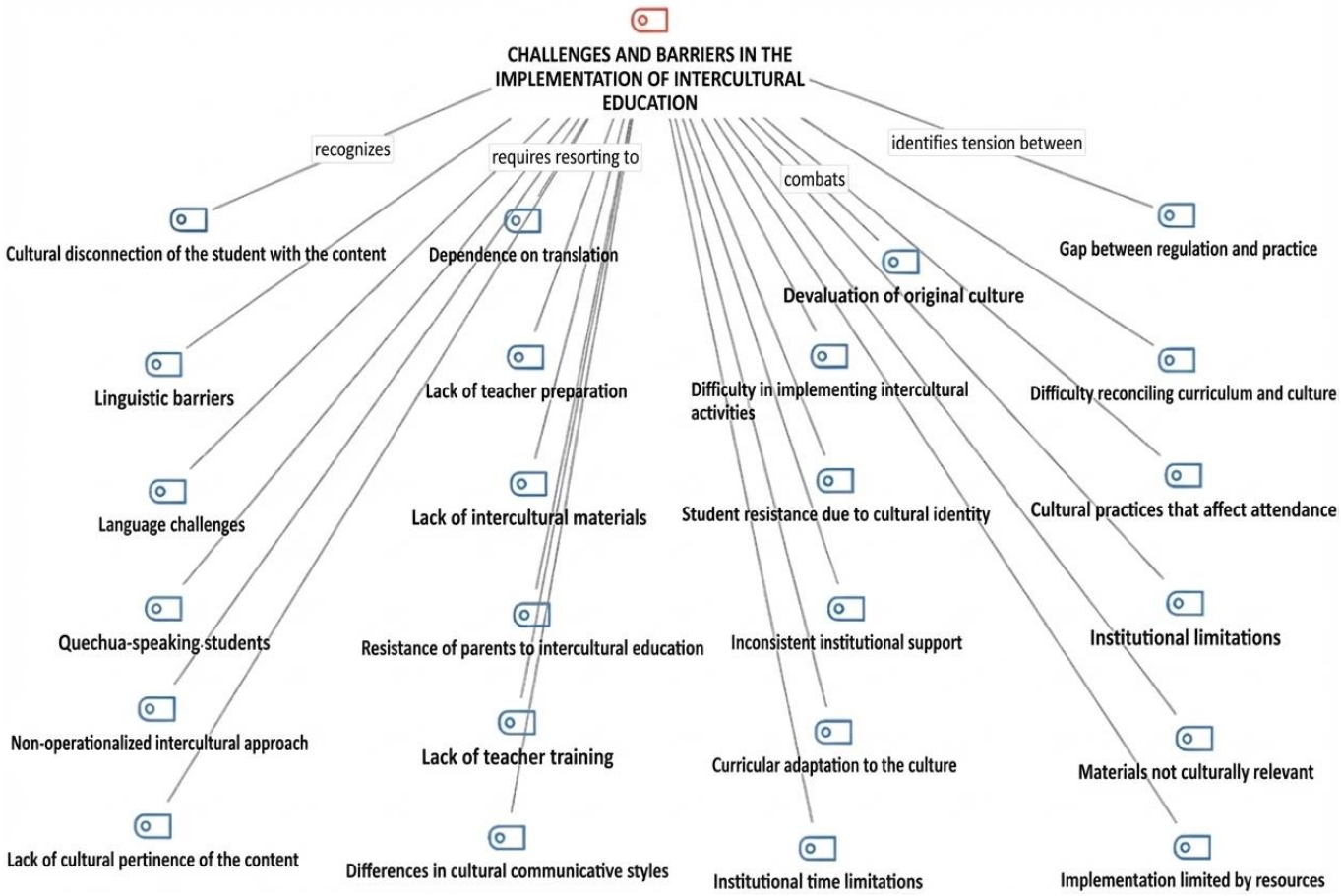
The coding process followed the principles of qualitative content analysis, starting with a holistic reading of the collected responses, followed by the identification of units of meaning, assignment of descriptive and interpretative codes, and subsequent grouping of these codes into higher-order thematic categories that capture the essential structures of the participants' lived experiences.

Scientific rigor was ensured through the criteria of credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024), along with adherence to ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntariness of participation.

Results

The findings reveal the following.

Figure 1
Challenges and barriers in implementing intercultural education



Note: Generated from the analysis of interviews with educators using MAXQDA.

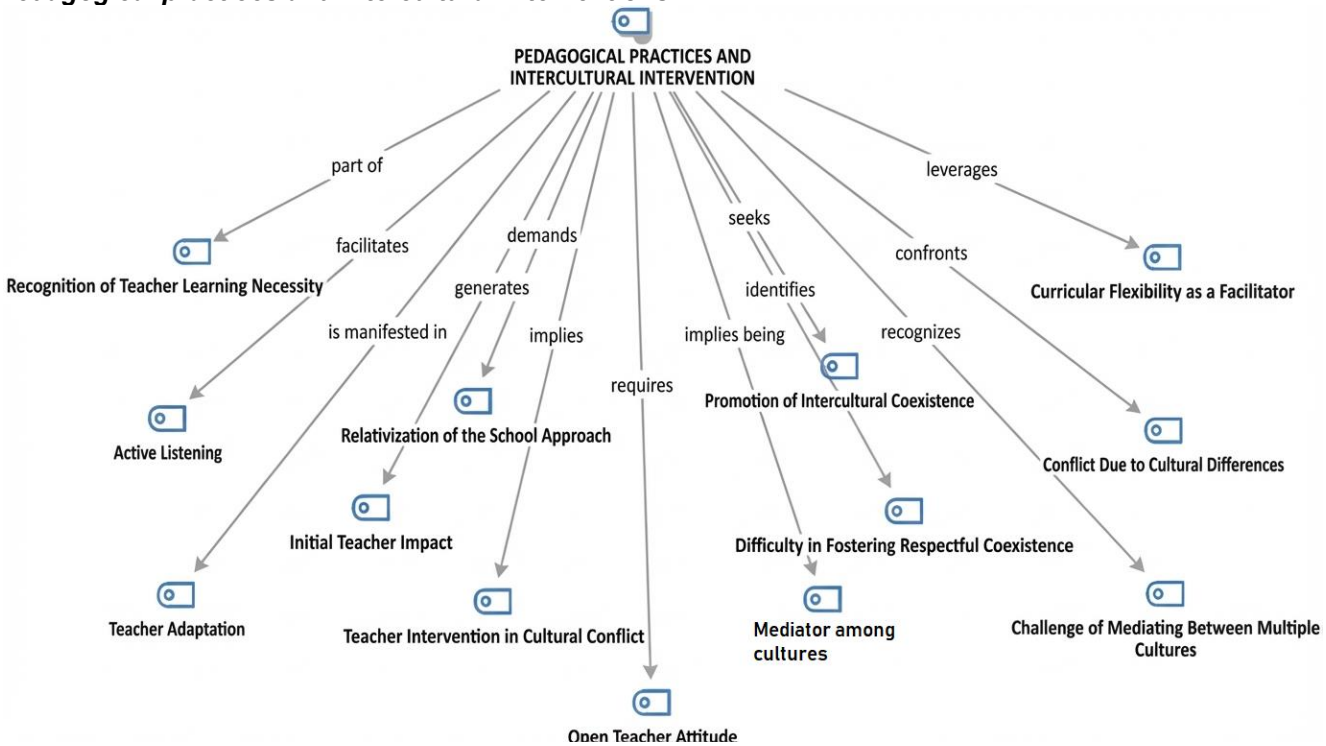
Category 1.

In relation to the first emerging category, educators experienced the implementation of intercultural education as a process fraught with structural challenges that limit their pedagogical efforts. Language barriers emerged as the most concerning challenge, generating feelings of helplessness due to reliance on translations to communicate with students whose native language is Quechua. The lack of specific training was perceived as a form of institutional neglect, with educators feeling they were navigating without adequate guidance in culturally complex contexts.

Participants expressed frustration over the absence of relevant resources and inconsistent support, compelling them to constantly improvise. Additionally, resistance from some parents and students created emotional conflicts, leading to a perception of the devaluation of Indigenous cultures as a profound barrier. The gap between policy and practice was experienced as a painful contradiction: intercultural discourse remains unoperationalized, relegated to rhetoric devoid of application in the face of institutional limitations and the temporal and resource constraints encountered daily.

Figure 2

Pedagogical practices and intercultural interventions



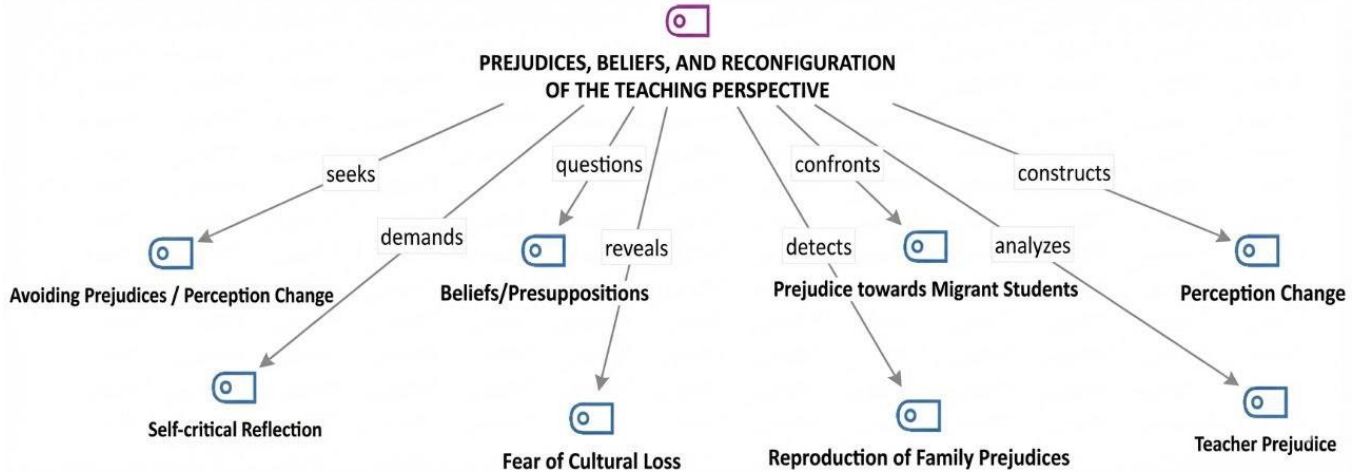
Note: Generated from the analysis of interviews with educators using MAXQDA.

Category 2.

Educators experienced intercultural practices as a complex domain requiring specialized competencies beyond conventional pedagogy. Active listening emerged as a fundamental practice for comprehending diverse worldviews, necessitating the suspension of prior judgments. The constant adjustment was experienced as a demanding yet necessary requirement, learning to relativize traditional schooling approaches.

The role of mediator between cultures represented a delicate and challenging position, particularly when confronting cultural conflicts and difficulties in fostering respectful coexistence among diverse realities. Educators acknowledged the challenge of simultaneously mediating multiple cultural identities, experiencing this complexity as a constant tension in their daily work.

Figure 3
Prejudices, beliefs, and reconfiguration of the teaching perspective



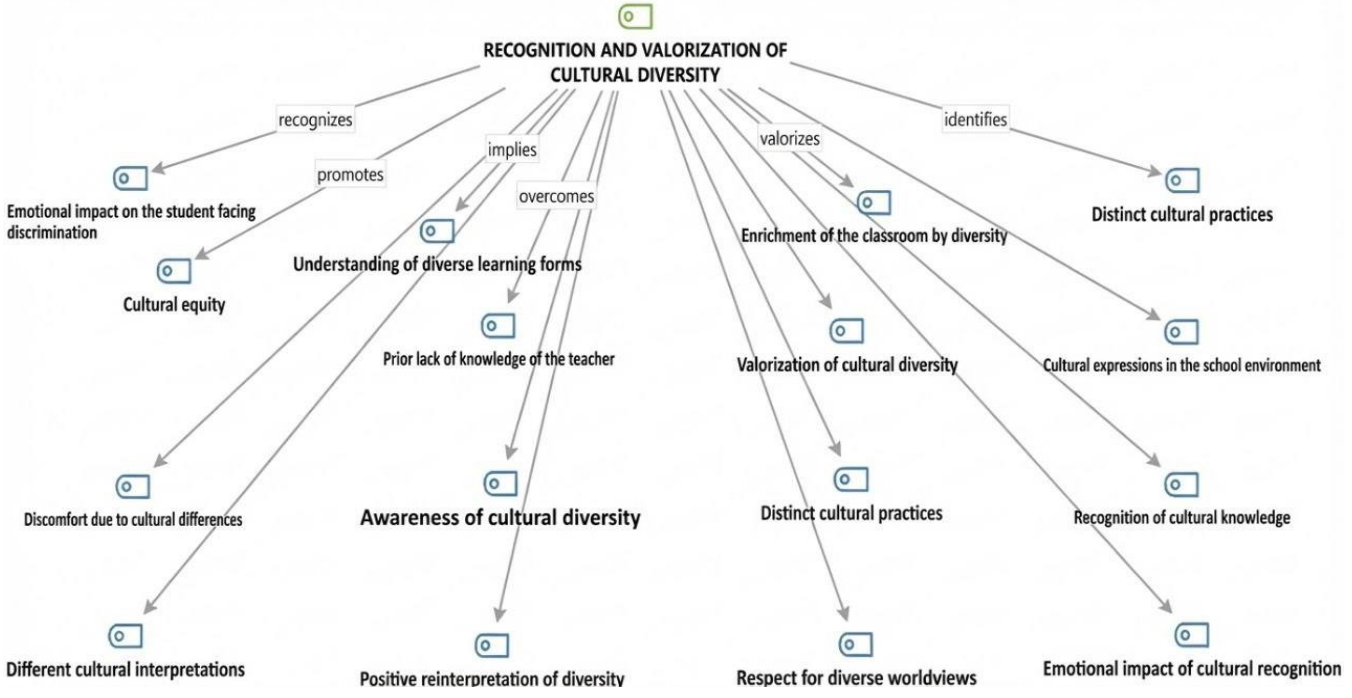
Note: Generated from the analysis of interviews with educators using MAXQDA.

Category 3.

Educators experienced the necessity to reconfigure certain aspects as a painful process of confronting their own cultural biases. The recognition of prejudices toward migrant students and the unconscious reproduction of familial stereotypes generated discomfort and deep personal questioning.

Self-critical reflection emerged as a complex yet essential tool, demanding courage to analyze attitudes perceived as discriminatory. Participants experienced this perceptual shift as a gradual transition from ethnocentric positions to an authentic acknowledgment of the other cultural identities.

Figure 4
Recognition and valorization of cultural diversity



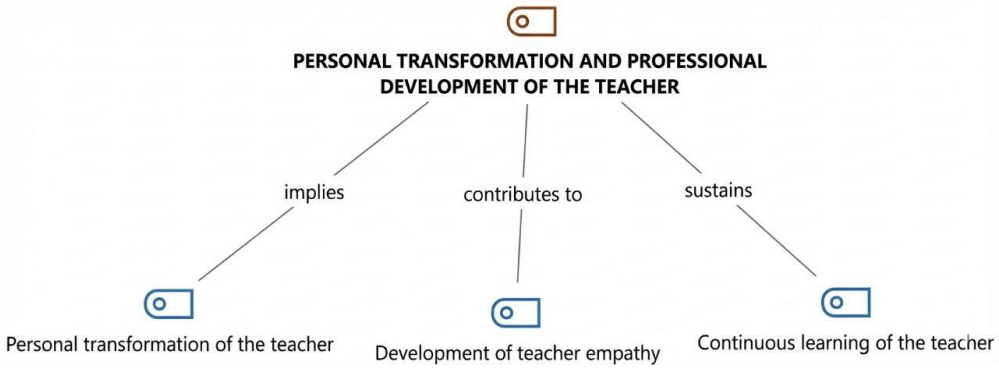
Note: Generated from the analysis of interviews with educators using MAXQDA.

Category 4.

The results reveal that educators' experiences with intercultural education constitute a transformative process that evolves from initial ignorance to active recognition of cultural diversity. This transition results in pedagogical enrichment, evidenced by an understanding of various ways of learning and the appreciation of cultural knowledge, alongside emotional tensions expressed through discomfort regarding cultural differences and the impact of discriminatory situations.

Educators develop an awareness that enables them to implement diverse cultural practices in the classroom; however, an ambivalent reinterpretation of diversity persists, oscillating between valuing it as a pedagogical resource and grappling with the challenges it presents in everyday practice.

Figure 5
Personal transformation and professional development of educators



Note: Generated from the analysis of interviews with educators using MAXQDA.

Category 5.

Personal transformation entails changes in educators' conceptions and values regarding diversity. This transformation fosters empathy toward the different cultural realities of their students and sustains a continuous learning process that allows educators to adapt and respond to the challenges of intercultural education.

Collectively, these findings indicate that implementing intercultural education is not limited to adopting pedagogical strategies, but demands a profound reconfiguration of educators' professional identity, where the personal, emotional, and professional intertwine in an ongoing development process.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal complex dimensions of the lived experiences of educators who critically engage with specialized literature on intercultural education, thereby challenging their prior knowledge concerning the implementation of intercultural practices in real educational contexts.

The structural obstacles identified are in stark contrast to the vision presented by Malik et al. (2025) regarding the development of educators' international mindset. While these authors argue that cultivating intercultural competencies enhances interactions in diverse contexts, the findings indicate that, without appropriate material and institutional conditions, such a mindset is insufficient. The disparity between intercultural discourse and practice confirms the warnings of Pacco et al. (2024) about the persistence of this issue in Latin American contexts, adding the emotional dimension of institutional neglect experienced by educators.

The paradox identified in pedagogical practices—where constant adaptation simultaneously fosters enrichment and exhaustion—resonates with the arguments of Dekker-Groen et al. (2025) regarding the paradox of tolerance. However, this study advances the discourse by showing that educators experience this tension as a perpetual existential fatigue arising from their roles as cultural mediators, suggesting that intercultural dialogue carries significant emotional costs that are rarely acknowledged or supported institutionally.

The documented process of reconfiguring prejudices deepens the observations made by Flores et al. (2024) regarding the need to recognize one's own stereotypes. Participants experienced this recognition as a painful confrontation requiring courage, highlighting an affective dimension of conceptual change among educators that remains underexplored in the literature, which often presents critical reflection as an essentially cognitive process rather than an emotionally challenging experience.

The ambivalence detected in recognizing cultural diversity complicates the deficit-versus-strength-based perspective discussed by Hue and Kennedy (2025). The results suggest that this is not a dichotomy resolvable through teacher training but rather an inherent tension within intercultural practice that educators continuously negotiate. This challenges the notion of intercultural competence as a stable skill, proposing instead that it be understood as a situated process dependent on context.

The documented identity transformation converses with findings by Elias and Mansouri (2023) on transformative interventions. While these authors note long-term changes in students, this study reveals that educators also undergo profound transformations that reshape their professional and personal identities. This transformation emerges as a necessary condition—though frequently unrecognized—for the effectiveness of any intercultural intervention, suggesting that educational policies that overlook the development of intercultural professional competencies perpetuate the gap between discourse and practice.

Finally, the results challenge the proposition by Narváez Ismael et al. (2025) that ongoing updating serves as the primary solution to intercultural challenges. Participants demonstrated that beyond technical training, they require emotional support, spaces for collective reflection, and transformations in structural conditions. This holistic necessity calls into question traditional teacher training models that prioritize technical competencies over personal transformation processes and the establishment of intercultural professional learning communities.

Conclusions

This study establishes fundamental conclusions regarding the lived experiences of educators in relation to the challenges of implementing intercultural education in culturally diverse classrooms.

First, the implementation of intercultural education is configured as a process marked by structural obstacles that exceed the individual capacities of educators. Language barriers, a lack of specific training, the absence of relevant materials, and inconsistent institutional support create a profound gap between normative intercultural discourse and the practical possibilities for its operationalization in the classroom. Educators experience this situation as a form of institutional neglect and a painful contradiction between expectations and actual conditions.

Second, intercultural pedagogical practices demand specialized competencies that extend beyond conventional teacher training. Active listening, constant adaptation, and cultural mediation are complex skills that involve suspending judgments, relativizing traditional approaches, and continually negotiating among multiple cultural identities. Educators experience this process as a continuous tension and existential fatigue linked to the demands of their daily work.

Moreover, the reconfiguration of educators' perspectives entails emotional confrontations related to concerns, stereotypes, and previously normalized cultural biases. Identifying these patterns, engaging in self-critical reflection, and transitioning from ethnocentric positions toward more open forms of cultural recognition constitute processes that require courage and elicit discomfort. This highlights that conceptual change in intercultural education possesses profound affective dimensions that often remain unrecognized in literature and teacher training.

Finally, the personal and professional transformation of educators emerges as an essential factor for the effective implementation of intercultural practices. Changes in conceptions, values, and pedagogical practices are intertwined with the development of empathy and continuous learning, demonstrating that intercultural education is not merely a pedagogical methodology but a comprehensive and holistic reconfiguration of the educator's identity. This reconfiguration necessitates sustained institutional support, spaces for collective reflection, and transformations in structural conditions to ensure viability and permanence over time.

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