

Educational inclusion: building life projects in rural contexts

Inclusión educativa: construyendo proyectos de vida en contextos rurales

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Abstract

Educational inclusion has gained significant importance in recent years by integrating mechanisms that facilitate the incorporation of the entire population into the educational system, also playing a role in the development of individuals' life projects. This process presents an even greater challenge in rural contexts, where specific conditions affect both teaching and learning. In this regard, this article presents a systematic analysis of educational inclusion focused on the development of life projects in rural Colombian contexts, identifying the challenges inherent to these communities. The research was conducted through a systematic search of relevant scientific articles and studies in the Google Scholar and Redalyc databases, applying the PRISMA protocol to select 15 works based on criteria of relevance and quality for analysis and interpretation. The results demonstrate that rural characteristics decisively influence the inclusion process of vulnerable youth and their motivation to build solid life projects. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the curricular, pedagogical, and socioeconomic limitations present in these environments constitute significant obstacles to both processes, requiring comprehensive and contextually sensitive approaches to promote truly inclusive and formative education.

Keywords: inclusion, educational institutions, rural education.

Resumen

La inclusión educativa ha adquirido gran relevancia en los últimos años al integrar mecanismos que facilitan la incorporación de toda la población al sistema formativo, interviniendo también en la construcción de los proyectos de vida de los individuos. Este proceso representa un desafío aún mayor en los contextos rurales, donde las condiciones específicas afectan tanto la enseñanza como el aprendizaje. En este sentido, el presente artículo realiza un análisis sistemático de la inclusión educativa orientada al desarrollo de proyectos de vida en contextos rurales colombianos, identificando los retos inherentes a estas comunidades. La investigación se llevó a cabo mediante una búsqueda sistemática de artículos científicos e investigaciones relevantes en las bases de datos Google Académico y Redalyc, aplicando el protocolo PRISMA para la selección de 15 trabajos según criterios de

pertinencia y calidad para su análisis e interpretación. Los resultados evidencian que las particularidades rurales influyen decisivamente en el proceso de inclusión de jóvenes en situación de vulnerabilidad y en su motivación para construir proyectos de vida sólidos. Asimismo, se destaca que las limitaciones curriculares, pedagógicas y socioeconómicas presentes en estos entornos constituyen obstáculos significativos para ambos procesos, requiriendo enfoques integrales y contextualmente sensibles para promover una educación verdaderamente inclusiva y formativa.

Palabras clave: inclusión, instituciones educativas, educación rural.

Introduction

Educational inclusion has been a cornerstone of various pedagogical theories, emphasizing teaching and learning models rooted in equality of opportunity. This framework seeks to ensure both access to and quality of education for all individuals. The significance of this principle has intensified with the enactment of inclusive laws targeting individuals with disabilities, aimed at phasing out special schools in favor of integrating students into mainstream educational institutions. This initiative began in the 1970s in countries such as Italy, the United States, and Canada. In Latin America, the 1994 Salamanca Declaration marked a turning point by redirecting special education services toward more inclusive models.

The regional agenda for inclusive social development, driven by organizations like the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2018), underscores the necessity of tackling inequality, discrimination, and social and economic exclusion affecting not only children and adolescents, but also vulnerable groups such as the elderly, youth, women, Indigenous populations, Afro-descendants, people with disabilities, migrants, and those displaced by conflict or natural disasters.

In this context, inclusive education transcends mere integration; it is conceived as a broader component encompassing all individuals, irrespective of their individual, social, or cultural conditions, or learning difficulties. Inclusive education is grounded in values such as respect, acceptance, and equity, promoting social and academic relationships in which all individuals are regarded equally, recognizing and valuing diversity within the framework of specific needs in the school environment.

According to CEPAL (2017), inclusion involves the full exercise of rights through social participation and access to essential goods and services, such as education, health care, and support resources. Achieving this requires optimal economic, social, cultural, and political conditions to ensure effective inclusion.

UNESCO (2005) emphasizes the need to avoid segregation in education, warning that it impedes interaction between individuals with and without disabilities, leading to a lack of mutual recognition across various spheres of life. More recently, UNESCO (2015) has championed inclusive education as a global trend that necessitates fostering a social culture of inclusion. This vision encourages the adoption of normative frameworks that enhance educational quality and lifelong learning. Nonetheless, it acknowledges that the differentiated circumstances across countries—regarding infrastructure, resources, teacher training, methodologies, and other aspects—present persistent barriers to achieving these goals, especially in rural contexts, where limitations are more pronounced.

In Colombia, the General Education Law (Law 115 of 1994) formally established the inclusion of individuals with special needs in educational institutions, mandating the organization of initiatives aimed at this goal. However, the current conditions reveal ongoing inequities related to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, technological, physical, and cognitive factors within the educational system. The full integration of these individuals into learning processes and social life remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas, where sociocultural, economic, and geographical characteristics create significant obstacles to the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Rural contexts: particularities of inclusion

Regarding rural educational institutions and their connection to inclusion, CEPAL (2018) notes that historically, rural schools have suffered from marked invisibility, reflected in a lack of understanding of the existing diversity in these contexts. This is compounded by the inability to tailor educational policies to rural particularities, the absence of specialized knowledge for curriculum correction and adaptation, and disconnection from the productive transformations characteristic of these areas. This situation results in a significant gap that adversely affects educational inclusion.

As Acosta et al. (2013) argue, this issue leads to processes of marginalization, discrimination, and income inequality, thereby exacerbating social gaps linked to inadequate educational coverage and the poor quality of teaching. In the Colombian context, the unique characteristics of rural settings highlight a disconnection between

school knowledge and the local productive system, as well as a diversity of needs and social heterogeneities that require targeted attention (Arias-Gaviria, 2017).

From this perspective, it is essential that a school not only serve as a space for knowledge acquisition but that this knowledge be aligned with rural life, the environment, and agricultural work. This necessitates the development of contextualized pedagogy that addresses the inherent problems and challenges of the rural context, recognizing that inclusion must involve the responsibility of establishing connections that meet these needs. Thus, the right to inclusive education should be based on policies that reduce gaps and promote learning from a perspective of diversity, aimed at addressing the unique challenges of these contexts (Buitrago & Valbuena, 2022).

Escobar et al. (2020) conceptualize the rural context as a social, geographical, and environmental space that presents fewer opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Key limitations include insufficient infrastructure, educational resources, faculty availability, and transportation, as well as the impact of social vulnerabilities such as poverty, conflict, and violence. Consequently, inclusive education in rural environments should focus on promoting the presence, learning, and participation of students while strengthening community values and environmental stewardship. For this, the commitment of educators is crucial; they must implement innovative methodological strategies that facilitate both academic and social success.

According to Hernández et al. (2019), teacher training and capacity building in rural schools are key elements for the effective implementation of inclusive education. Educators must be capable of identifying the characteristics, needs, and interests of excluded students or those at risk of exclusion within educational processes, thereby designing curriculum adaptations and adjusting pedagogical practices. This entails that rural educational institutions modify their physical and technological infrastructure, as well as their materials and educational conceptions, to adequately respond to the specific context.

The accumulation of these factors in rural education negatively affects inclusion, jeopardizing the effective realization of students' life projects. Experiencing educational and social difficulties can generate feelings of lagging behind, increasing school dropout rates and reinforcing conditions of vulnerability that hinder the development of a solid life project.

Life projects, inclusion, and education

According to D'Angelo (2003), a life project is intrinsically linked to the holistic development of human growth, incorporating essential aspects related to the individual, their social situation, self-direction, and competencies that allow one to feel fulfilled. For the author, this process brings individuals closer to the ultimate purpose of existence—happiness—thus constituting a category oriented toward personal emancipation. In this regard, the life project emerges as a fundamental framework that guides personal decisions by evaluating available means and the conditions of the immediate environment. Therefore, its construction depends on contextual characteristics, social situations, and the role that the individual plays within society.

Recognizing this, promoting the development of a life project in rural schools is crucial to enhancing the skills and capabilities that facilitate decision-making regarding the future aspirations of young people, helping them define what they wish to become and do to achieve genuine fulfillment. This process must consider fundamental values and the ability to adapt to changing conditions, promoting the development of an active social identity. In this context, D'Angelo (2003) emphasizes that students are not isolated from their social and familial contexts; in fact, in rural areas, many children actively participate in agricultural work, which creates significant tensions between their personal life projects and the circumstances provided by their environment.

On another note, Cifuentes and Moreno (2015) point out that life projects are profoundly influenced by the immediate context in which young individuals develop, especially by their families and schools. The latter serves as a key space to encourage students to construct life projects that align with their realities and concrete possibilities.

In this sense, inclusive education is closely linked to the development of life projects, as it promotes environments where young people not only envision their futures but also experience contexts where integrative practices are visible and effective across all possible domains. For this reason, the present article aims to provide a systematic analysis of educational inclusion and its impact on building life projects in rural contexts in Colombia.

Methodology

Concerning the methodological component, a systematic review method was adopted, defined by Benet et al. (2014) as a rigorous technique for interpreting and synthesizing available scientific evidence related to a specific research question. This methodology involves a structured and specialized search for scientific documents to systematically collect, evaluate, and analyze relevant studies. In this instance, the search was conducted using the databases Google Scholar and Redalyc, employing carefully selected key terms to locate articles and studies pertinent to the central theme of analysis: educational inclusion and the development of life projects in rural contexts.

The selected time frame for document selection spanned from 2020 to 2024, ensuring the relevance and timeliness of the information reviewed. Moreover, the publication language was not a limitation, allowing for the inclusion of research in Spanish, English, and other languages, thereby enriching the diversity of perspectives reflected in the studies analyzed.

The final selection of works was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, internationally recognized as a rigorous methodological tool for systematizing reviews. This protocol facilitated the application of explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, prioritizing the relevance, quality, and thematic pertinence of the documents, particularly those centered on the context of rural education in Colombia. Thus, coherence was ensured between the study's objectives and the analyzed sources, optimizing the scientific rigor and validity of the derived conclusions.

Figure 1
PRISMA method

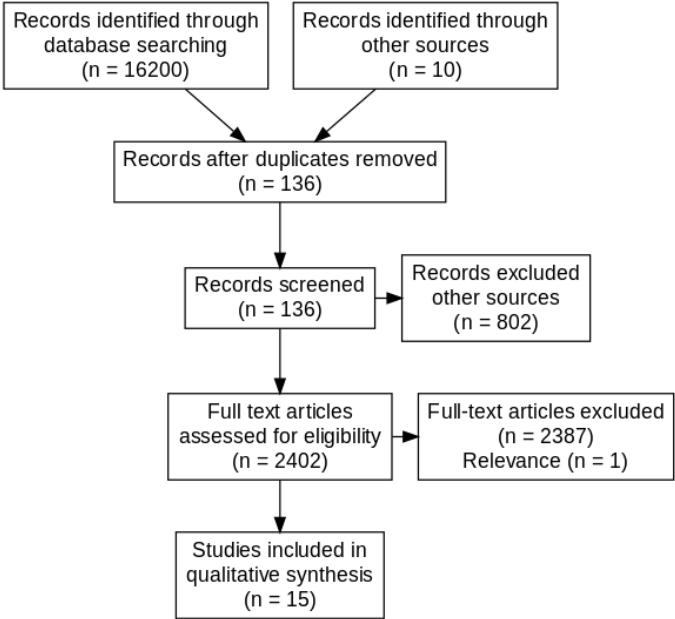


Table 1
Selected studies

N°	Analyzed studies
1	Erazo-Borrás, C. Y., Ceballos-Mora, A. H., & Matabanchoy-Salazar, J. M. (2022). Mirada ecológica en la construcción del proyecto de vida de jóvenes rurales. (2021). <i>Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud</i> , 20(1), 1-25. https://doi.org/10.11600/ricsnj.20.1.5255
2	Segura Gutiérrez, J. M., & Torres, H. F. (2020). Educación rural e inclusión social en Colombia. Reflexiones desde la matriz neoliberal. <i>Plumilla Educativa</i> , 25(1), 71-97. https://doi.org/10.30554/pe.1.3831.2020
3	Olave Rodriguez, S. A., & Vázquez Atochero, A. (2022). El imaginario de maestro y su incidencia en el proyecto de vida en estudiantes de la media de una escuela normal rural en Boyacá-Colombia. <i>MODULEMA. Revista Científica Sobre Diversidad Cultural</i> , 6, 24–39. https://doi.org/10.30827/modulema.v6i.24037
4	García-Yepes, K. (2020) Papel del docente y de la escuela en el fortalecimiento de los proyectos de vida alternativos (PVA). <i>Revista Colombiana de Educación</i> , 79. https://doi.org/10.17227/rce.num79-7453
5	Jiménez Castaño, C. P., & Drago Cárdenas, L. A. (2021). <i>Proyectos pedagógicos productivos, generadores de estrategias de inclusión social para la mitigación de la deserción escolar</i> [Tesis de maestría, Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia]. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12494/33264
6	Suárez Sandoval, N. (2021). <i>La educación rural la construcción de proyectos de vida de los jóvenes: currículos vs narrativas estudiantiles</i> . [Tesis de maestría, Universidad Nacional de Colombia]. Repositorio Institucional UNAL. https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/items/d672d7de-6791-4593-a045-3e776e589274

7	Díaz-Garay, I., Narváez-Escorcía, I., & Amaya-De Armas, T. (2020) El proyecto de vida como competencia básica en la formación integral de estudiantes de educación media. <i>Revista de Investigación, Desarrollo e Innovación</i> . 11(1). http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2027-83062020000200113
8	Giraldo, K., Marín, C., & Realpe, J. (2022) <i>Revisión sistemática de literatura sobre el proyecto de vida y sus formas de aplicación en estudiantes de bachillerato</i> [Trabajo de grado, Universidad CESMAG]. Repositorio Institucional CESMAG. http://repositorio.unicesmag.edu.co:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/743
9	Orejarena Silva, H. A. A., & Alvarino Cadena, E. J. (2022). Efectos del proyecto de vida en el autoconcepto, autoestima y orientación universitaria en estudiantes rurales. <i>Praxis Pedagógica</i> , 21(31), 81-95. https://doi.org/10.26620/uniminuto.praxis.21.31.2021.81-95
10	Cogollo Vega, R., & Medina Polo, R. (2021). <i>La educación indígena propia en la construcción del proyecto de vida y la afirmación de la identidad cultural de los estudiantes de la comunidad zenú. estudio de caso: Institución Educativa Técnica Alvaro Ulcué Chocué del municipio de Tuchín Córdoba</i> [Trabajo de grado, Universidad de Córdoba]. Repositorio Institucional UNICORDOBA. https://repositorio.unicordoba.edu.co/entities/publication/d39814e5-b214-4c40-b578-d61c5abdee08
11	Vargas, Y. C., & Romero Alfonso, S. L. (2021). Escuela en ruralidad: una mirada a la inclusión en la educación. <i>Educación y Ciencia</i> , 25, e12313. https://doi.org/10.19053/0120-7105.eyc.2021.25.e12313
12	Maldonado, E. (2020) Inclusión educativa en Colombia: un abordaje conceptual desde las metodologías de diseño universal de aprendizajes (DUA) y plan individual de ajustes razonables (PIAR), <i>EDUCA</i> , 1. http://historico.upel.edu.ve:81/revistas/index.php/EDUCA/article/view/9993
13	Orozco, W. (2022). El maestro rural en Colombia: desafíos ante la memoria y la reconstrucción del tejido social. <i>Praxis & Saber</i> , 13(33), e13199. https://revistas.uptc.edu.co/index.php/praxis_saber/article/view/13199
14	Giraldo Macías, C. F., Meneses Villagrà, J. Ángel, & Caballero Sahelices, M. C. (2020). Aprendizaje basado en proyectos como estrategia para aprender sobre electricidad: estudio de caso en una escuela rural colombiana. <i>Investigações em Ensino de Ciências</i> , 25(3), 145-161. https://doi.org/10.22600/1518-8795.ienci2020v25n3p145
15	Carreño, W. F. (2021). <i>Programa de Orientación Socio-Ocupacional en entornos educativos rurales</i> . [Tesis de maestría, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana]. Repositorio Institucional de la UPB. http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11912/9209

Findings and analysis

After consolidating the search and selection of materials related to educational inclusion and the development of life projects in rural contexts in Colombia, this section presents the main conjectures that emerge from the review, addressing both convergent contributions and identified divergences in the analyzed works.

One prominent perspective examines life projects through the lens of the students themselves, particularly those nearing the completion of their secondary education. According to Cedeño (2021), many of these young individuals do not receive adequate guidance that considers the particularities and specific contexts of their rural educational environments. In many rural areas in Colombia, the teacher stands as the sole representative of state authority, assuming a crucial community leadership role due to the historical importance of rural schools in regions marked by decades of armed conflict. As such, these educators are expected not only to provide inclusive education for all children and youth but also to inspire them to develop their life projects (Orozco, 2022).

In this context, Cogollo and Medina (2021) highlight the emancipatory potential of life projects when rooted in a dialogic education that interweaves traditional and technical knowledge. This includes learning artisanal skills and agroecological practices aimed at rural entrepreneurship through innovative techniques to diversify and revalue local products. Such an approach not only incorporates the identity characteristics of communities—such as their worldview, oral traditions, ancestral medicine, and local history—but also strengthens the students' sense of belonging, thereby integrating the inclusive component from a holistic perspective.

This is corroborated by the findings of Orejarena and Alvarino (2022), who emphasize the impact that life project planning has on students' academic self-awareness, self-esteem, and future expectations, particularly in their university selection process. These authors further underline the influence of psychosocial factors in such planning, positioning the life project as a key tool in educational processes, as it recognizes and promotes the development of individual skills and potentials among adolescents (Giraldo et al., 2022).

In alignment with these views, Díaz-Garay et al. (2020) maintain that the construction and development of life projects occur in close collaboration with teachers and families, who exert a decisive influence in unfavorable

sociocultural contexts like rural Colombian areas. In such settings, where students' self-esteem and determination often face limitations, it becomes imperative to implement actions aimed at motivating and supporting youth as they embark on their life projects.

It is important to note that adverse conditions, such as historical violence, poverty, parental educational shortcomings, and the absence of state support, prevail in most of these rural environments. These factors directly impact not only educational opportunities but also the school curriculum. In this regard, Suárez (2021) emphasizes that the curriculum must be aligned with the sector's specific characteristics to contribute effectively to students' life project development. Complementarily, Olave and Vázquez (2022) argue that the experiences lived by students manifest diverse intersubjectivities, stemming from multiple historical, social, and cultural contexts, reinforcing the necessity for education to recognize social and cultural plurality in all its complexity.

According to Erazo-Borrás et al. (2022), the development of life projects among rural Colombian youth is fraught with multiple challenges arising from both individual and social factors related to their contextual relationships. They thus consider it crucial to incorporate educational inclusion as a guiding principle to access multiple formative processes within the school environment. In this vein, Giraldo et al. (2020) stress the urgency of reaching a consensus aimed at promoting educational practices that bring students closer to understanding and addressing the challenges inherent to their contexts, fostering scientific competencies, collaborative skills, and genuine inclusive practices.

Maldonado (2020) draws attention to the lack of an appropriate conceptual and methodological approach to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Individual Plan for Reasonable Adjustments (IPRA) within educational inclusion in Colombia. This absence means that students in rural areas are not fully gaining autonomy, effective learning, and equitable participation in education, thus undermining their rights. Consequently, there is a demand for a renewed educational model that generates professional profiles aligned with principles of inclusion and quality across any context. In coherence, Vargas and Romero (2021) highlight that inclusion processes in rural education are marked by specific practices and discourses that require critical and contextualized analysis. Therefore, this article seeks to serve as a reference for future studies focusing on the challenges of inclusive education in Colombia.

Additionally, the role of Productive Pedagogical Projects is emphasized as a key strategy to promote social inclusion and transform pedagogical practices, ensuring they respond to the needs, differences, and contextual realities of students while incorporating the development of life projects (Jiménez & Drago, 2021). García-Yepes (2020) reiterates the crucial role of educators and the educational system in implementing innovative pedagogical practices that integrate learning with life skills.

Finally, Segura and Torres (2020) emphasize that rural education plays a significant transformative role in social inclusion; however, growing social inequalities persist, highlighting the need to deepen the appreciation and plurality of knowledge that defines rural life. From this perspective, the reviewed works not only insist on the importance of educational inclusion but also on the complexity and multiplicity of factors that intertwine this component with the development of life projects among students in rural contexts, showcasing the interdependence and challenges characterizing both processes.

Conclusions

In the diverse rural contexts of Colombia, numerous scenarios emerge, although they share common conditions that pose significant challenges. Among these are the increasing social inequalities, evidenced by inadequate infrastructure, a lack of resources, and difficulties with both access to and appropriation of technology. Within this framework, teachers assume a prominent role, emerging as community leaders due to the historical significance that rural schools have acquired after decades of armed conflict. As such, these educators are expected to effectively implement the inclusive component, directed particularly at the children and youth within their territories, which could positively influence the construction and strengthening of their life projects.

Building on this premise, it is crucial to deepen the appreciation and recognition of the plurality of knowledge that characterizes Colombian rural life, addressing both individual and social needs present in educational processes. In particular, it is essential to recognize and enhance the abilities and potential of rural youth, who often exhibit limited self-esteem and determination to achieve their goals. Therefore, comprehensive actions must be implemented to promote both educational inclusion and the formulation and development of their life projects. This reality, vividly experienced in rural areas, is also shared in urban settings where similar barriers persist, affecting the autonomy, learning, and equitable participation of youth, to the detriment of the full exercise of their rights.

This underscores the necessity for a renewed educational model that facilitates the development of professional profiles aligned with inclusive, quality education capable of responding to contextual diversity. It is clear that rural education plays a fundamental role in social inclusion from a transformative perspective, thus must

encourage teaching practices that connect students to the specific issues of their contexts. This entails enhancing their competencies, scientific skills, and other abilities, not only for their academic present but also in consideration of their future projections, particularly through the conscious and robust construction of their life projects. In this sense, the practice of inclusive education serves as an essential pillar to ensure that rural youth access real opportunities for holistic development, fostering their social and academic protagonism in historically complex scenarios.

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