Cultural diversity on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast: Challenges and opportunities in education

Caroline Maxine Palmer Marley (1)
caroline.palmer@bicu.edu.ni
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8507-7418

Henry Alexander Petrie Bejarano (1)
malaji_2004@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4190-037X

Juan Asdrúbal Flores-Pacheco (1)
asdrubal.flores@do.bicu.edu.ni
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6553-7202

(1) Subsistema Educativo Autonómico Regional (SEAR)
Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU)
Bluefields, Nicaragua

Diversidad cultural en la costa caribe de Nicaragua: desafíos y oportunidades en educación

Abstract

The problem addressed in this study is the management of diversity and interculturality in education and its communication effects on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual region. The objective is to train citizens capable of perceiving, analyzing and interpreting their environments to generate responses to needs and problems. The materials and methods include a critical review of existing literature and the analysis of specific educational experiences, such as the model of the Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU). The results show that diversity, when properly managed, enriches the educational experience and fosters empathy, tolerance and diversity in the classroom, creating an inclusive, creative and proactive environment. The discussion highlights those challenges such as language barriers, stereotypes and prejudices, when handled positively, can become opportunities to improve educational communication. Educators, properly trained, play a crucial role in this process, promoting effective intercultural communication. This study underlines the importance of an inclusive education that values cultural and ethnic wealth, especially in regions such as the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

Keywords: social cohesion, creativity, cultural diversity, empathy, inclusion.

Resumen

El problema abordado en este estudio es la gestión de la diversidad e interculturalidad en la educación universitaria y sus efectos comunicacionales en la costa caribe de Nicaragua, una región multiétnica, multicultural y plurilingüe. Los materiales y métodos incluyen una revisión crítica de la literatura existente y el análisis de experiencias educativas concretas, en este caso, el modelo de la Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU). Los resultados muestran que la diversidad, cuando se gestiona adecuadamente, enriquece la experiencia educativa; asimismo, fomenta la empatía y tolerancia en el aula, creando un ambiente inclusivo, creativo y proactivo. La discusión resalta que los desafíos como las barreras lingüísticas, estereotipos y prejuicios, cuando se manejan de manera positiva, pueden convertirse en oportunidades para mejorar la comunicación educativa. Los educadores, debidamente formados, juegan un rol crucial en este proceso, promoviendo una comunicación intercultural efectiva. Este estudio subraya la importancia de una educación inclusiva que valore la riqueza cultural y étnica, especialmente en regiones como la costa caribe de Nicaragua.

Palabras clave: cohesión social, creatividad, diversidad cultural, empatía, inclusión.

Introduction

In the contemporary global context, education faces the challenge of managing and take advantage of student diversity as a source of educational enrichment. This diversity comprehends cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socioeconomic and gender differences, which not only elevate the educational environment, but also are major opportunities to improve quality learning. Nicaragua, particularly the Caribbean Coast, offers a unique stage where diversity not only depicts a challenge, but also a source of educational innovation.

As per Pérez-Gonzáles & Torres-Guzmán (2020), diversity in classrooms is a complex phenomenon, requiring inclusive and sensible strategies for students' cultural and contextual nuances. The Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua stresses the value of an education to promote merging national values and history and local culture knowledge (Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua, 1987). This legal basis affirms the need for an inclusive education which reflects and respects the country's culture and ethnicity.

The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is a region characterized by a substantial cultural diversity with indigenous and afro-descendant communities who possess their own languages, traditions and worldviews (Wallace Morales, 2022). This

region is a particular challenge for the Nicaraguan education system. Equally, this diversity offers a unique opportunity to develop educational practices to not only recognize, but also value and enhance cultural differences (Cassells, 2017).

This work aims to delve into student diversity in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and its impact in the classroom's intercultural communication; for this, specific challenges of cultural and ethnic diversity are identified and analyzed. Hence, direct strategies will be carried out to improve the communicative act in the Caribbean Coast educational environment. Merging goals will allow us to demonstrate how diversity can be exploited to enrich the learning process and promote a more inclusive and equitable education.

The value of this study is in its potential to transform the way education is addressed in culturally diverse regions. By understanding and valuing the cultural and ethnic diversity in the classroom, not only does the quality of education improve, but inclusive and equitable education is also promoted. This is relevant for the historically marginated communities. In this context, the educational system faces significant challenges to address in an adequate manner the needs of a diverse population (National Council of Universities, 2022).

The contribution of this study is focused in providing a critical review of the existent literature and in offering practical examples of how the strategies of intercultural communication could be implemented effectively in classrooms, to teachers and policymakers, concrete tools to improve the educational communication in multicultural contexts.

According to Leiva Olivencia & Márquez Pérez (2012), intercultural communication is grounded in sincere and intentional purpose of promoting the dialogue between people from different cultural groups, as constituted in a new space of social interactions (p. 73). The objective of this communication is the interaction between culturally different individuals.

In brief, this work aspires to delve deeper into the comprehension of the student diversity as a valuable resource for the educational development in the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, with the aim of proposing concrete strategies to optimize the communication and learning on intercultural contexts.

Diversity in the Caribbean Coast

Diversity is a valuable resource and a powerful tool for the construction of inclusive and equitable societies. In the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, the individual and group differences must be recognized, valued, and respected to promote a truly intercultural education. Cassells Martínez (2019) highlights that the inclusion involves guaranteeing that all people, independent from their differences, are accepted and respected in equal conditions. This goes beyond simple tolerance; it is about creating environments where all people can fully participate, contribute and have the same opportunities without discrimination or exclusion. In this context, the Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU) has developed an educational and organizational model that integrates the communitarian and intercultural perspectives, recognizing and valuing the cultural diversity of their students and communities, with the objective of facilitating inclusion and equity in education.

In this regard, it is crucial to reflect about diversity related with the indigenous villages of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, those descendants of the population who lived in the country in the times of the conquest, colonization or establishment of current borders, and that have preserved their social, economic, cultural and political institution (Merminskaya, 2011). That is how the situation becomes complex when it is about populations with a rich cultural, organizational and political richness, which reflects unique worldviews, stories, and linguistic forms.

Diversity is a complex concept that requires to an analysis and detailed interpretation, specialization in the educational context of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. This region is characterised for its rich variability and wealthy cultural, ethnic, racial, of gender, religion, capacities, among other things. According to Cassells Martínez (2019), the diversity in this area is presented in multiple forms, reflecting the complexity and richness of their social composition. Diversity is inherent to human nature and is present in all corners of the country, and the Caribbean Coast is not an exception.

Interculturality in education

The interculturality is vital, mainly in the Caribbean zone of Nicaragua, since in this process, communities interrelate and interact. There can't be interculturality without dialogue, exchange and understanding of what we are, each one in our own cultural and historical context. Vargas Hernández (2008) arises that we find ourselves immersed in a truly multicultural, intercultural and interdependent world, which present the challenge of how to comprehend and interact with each other, this diversity presenting a series of important and potentially decisive topics (p. 3).

As stated by Vargas Hernández (2008), majority of the countries are culturally diverse, with more than 600 groups of living languages and 5,000 ethnic groups in 184 independent states around the world. In this sense, it is crucial that educators adopt an intercultural approach, promoting empathy, tolerance, and diversity to create an inclusive and comprehensive environment.

Challenges of the intercultural education

In the current society, it persists challenges derived from discrimination, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, and other types of discrimination, that limit the holistic development of people and communities. Pellicer (2008) argues that a culturally diverse society submits to deep changes to the interpersonal behaviour and the strategies of teaching and learning (p. 1). In the context of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, these changes are evident and highlight the importance of conceiving student diversity as an opportunity of learning and not as an obstacle.

The challenges in educational spaces of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast involve the approach of a series of vital elements that influence in the daily life of these environments. The region, characterized by its cultural richness and diversity, faces specific challenges that must be comprehended and addressed from an intercultural perspective.

The language

One of the most important challenges in the communication inside a diverse educational environment is the language. Students can have different proficiency levels of the language used in school, which can hamper the comprehension and participation in class (Moraga López et al. 2022). Some students speak a different language at home and confront the cultural and linguistic barriers when interacting in school. This can lead to a lack of participation and, therefore, comprehension, which affects negatively the educational process and entails the marginalisation of some students. Therefore, it is fundamental for educators to develop teaching strategies that recognize and value the linguistic diversity to promote an inclusive and equitable environment.

Intercultural communication in the classroom can boost empathy, tolerance in front of diversity, contributing to an inclusive and enriching environment. Stereotypes and prejudices are important challenges in communication, since they can generate negative perceptions towards others, based in cultural, racial or gender differences, affecting interpersonal relations and the classroom dynamic. Educators must promote constantly a respectful and free of prejudices communication among their students.

Intercultural comprehension

Another significant challenge in communication is intercultural comprehension. Student diversity brings along a variety of values, beliefs and cultural practices. Students have different perspectives and life experiences, which can generate misunderstandings and conflicts in communication. Educators must be aware of these cultural differences to create an inclusive environment that promotes the comprehension and acceptance of cultural diversity. Rodríguez-Gómez et al. (2020) point at the importance of implementing learning strategies both formal and informal to facilitate the integration and harmonious coexistence between students of diverse cultures.

Student diversity

In the educational spaces of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, student diversity is a palpable reality with students and educators exposed to different cultures, languages, and worldviews. This diversity, although challenging, must be seen as an essential opportunity to enrich the educational experience and prepare the youth for a globalized and diverse world. Barrios Hernández et al. (2017) highlight that knowledge management and capacity of innovation are crucial to approach these challenges and transform diversity in an educational advantage.

Diversity and its contextual complexities should not generate situations of discrimination, exclusion or conflicts that limit human rights and ancestry of people. Rather, should assume as generator of opportunities in the processes of communication and exchange. In the educational context of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, it is crucial to recognize that the cultural and linguistic origins of students can contribute different ideas and approaches to projects and homework in the classroom, stimulating creativity and innovation. Cultural and linguistic diversity, when it is well managed, enriches the educational process and promotes an environment of collaboration and mutual respect.

Stereotypes and prejudices

Stereotypes and prejudices represent a significant challenge, since students can have negative perceptions towards their peers, due to cultural, racial or gender differences, which affects interpersonal relations and communication in the classroom. Educators, aware of this reality, must promote constantly the respectful and free of prejudices communication between students. When prejudices are not addressed in an appropriate manner, they generate conflicts that prevent the acceptance and recognition of diversity, truncating the interactions and dialogue.

Opportunities in intercultural education

To address and take advantage of student diversity in the current education is fundamental that educators adopt strategies of inclusive learning. According to Stefoni et al. (2016), intercultural education must not only focus on the transmission of knowledge, but also in the creation of spaces where students' cultural and linguistic is valued and respected.

The cultural and linguistic origins of students in this region can contribute different ideas and approaches to projects and homework in the classroom, stimulating creativity and innovation. These students can learn to work together to find solutions to the challenges that are presented to them, taking advantage of their diverse perspective. The adoption of effective communication techniques on the part of educators is crucial to address the challenges and make use of the opportunities that student diversity offers.

The transformational role of educators

Educators must promote inclusive environments from the classrooms. It is necessary a deep understanding of diversity, integrating ethnicity and the different cultures inside any geographical space. It is impossible to promote diversity, empathy and mutual respect without processes of dialogues, without understanding the other; only the well guided dialogue will allow to comprehend that the differences between people, collectives, communities and ethnics are source of strength and cultural richness.

The role of educators implies a program of integral and evolutionary training, that goes beyond the disintegrated specialities of sociocultural and historical contexts, harmonizing the human-academic objectives in a holistic manner to generate constant evolution (Mendoza & Flores-Pacheco, 2021). This learning is complex, and our educational system requires to be completely prepared. For this purpose, it is imperative to advance in the subject of raising awareness and intercultural preparation.

Therefore, the training of teachers must go beyond the disintegrated specialities of the sociocultural and historical contexts (Flores-Pacheco & Mendoza, 2021). It is necessary a program of integral and evolutionary training that harmonizes all the human-academic objectives in a holistic manner, generating not only growth, but a constant evolution. Pérez Rivera (2007), Serrato & Rueda Beltrán (2010) highlight the need of evaluating and improving continuously teaching to adapt to the changing needs of students in an intercultural context.

Proposal of improvement against the challenges of education in the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast

In the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, the implementation of strategic dynamics and pertinent is crucial to address the educational needs of a diverse and multicultural population. Educators must adopt strategies that adjust themselves to the specific realities of learners, considering their cultural, linguistic and social contexts.

This holistic approach is essential to encourage a harmonic education from an intercultural perspective. In this context, the use of strategies and pedagogical tools becomes fundamental to strengthen the educational processes, promoting a meaningful learning in which the student is the protagonist of their own educational development.

Exchange of intercultural experiences

A concrete example of this dynamic is the exchange of intercultural experiences between learners in an environment of healthy coexistence, mutual help, respect and companionship, as it has been observed in the experiences of the BICU's educational model. This exchange, that is done both in the mother language as in Spanish, allows students to share and value their cultural experiences, promoting a deeper comprehension of diversity. According to Wallace Morales (2022), this educational model has demonstrated that effective and assertive intercultural communication to reduce the gap between the individual diversities which emerge in learning spaces.

Cultural diversity in the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast not only presents challenges, but also valuable opportunities we have not yet been able to see in a fair and appropriate manner. The educational systems, structured for the achievement of goals and objectives, use diverse strategies, methods and techniques that are implemented in different levels and educational stages. These strategies look for, not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the inclusion and respect of cultural diversity. Among the used strategies, we can find legends of historically relevant villages, illustrations, investigations about the history of indigenous people and the use of phrases in languages such as Miskito, English and Mayagna.

Practical examples in the classroom

Let's consider two examples in a classroom that illustrate how cultural diversity can be managed in an effective manner:

Example 1: A student comes from a different culture from the others. The teacher makes their presence notorious, turning them in a key performer in the educational process. The student exposes their customs, beliefs and how they live in their community. This exchange contributes to their peers' understanding of diversity, allowing to become aware of a determined way of being, a culture and history. This process gradually generates the inclusion and participation of everyone.

Example 2: A student communicates themselves in their mother tongue, while their peers are proficient in the language classes are taught. Diverse strategies can be applied to achieve a full inclusion of the

student: the classroom learns Keywords and phrases of the student's mother tongue and the teacher oversees ensuring a good communication between everyone.

Conclusions

The study about student diversity and intercultural diversity in the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast reveals a series of essential conclusions to comprehend and address the challenges and opportunities that are present in this region. Next, the main conclusions are emphasised:

Cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast is a valuable resource that must be recognized and valued. This recognition is essential to promote an inclusive education to respect and celebrate the cultural and ethnic differences of students.

Intercultural education stands out as a crucial approach to promote inclusion, respect and comprehension of the cultural diversity. This approach allows to transform challenges in opportunities for personal and collective growth, facilitating the creation of enriching and comprehensive educational environments.

It is fundamental to implement pedagogical strategies that are adjusted to the cultural, linguistic and social realities of students. Strategies such as the exchange of intercultural experiences and use of mother tongues in the classroom are examples of effective practices to promote inclusion and cultural comprehension.

The linguistic and cultural diversity of the significant challenges in the educational communication. It is necessary to develop teaching strategies that recognize and value this diversity to promote in an inclusive and equitable environment. Educators must be aware of the cultural and linguistic differences to facilitate an effective and assertive in the classroom.

The adoption of an intercultural approach in education has a wide potential impact, improvement of student participation, academic performance and reduces the derivative conflicts of cultural misunderstandings. In addition, this can be used as a model for other regions with similar characteristics, in Nicaragua as in other countries with multicultural contexts.

It is crucial to transform the perception of student diversity, conceiving it not as an obstacle of learning and growth. This transformation is essential to create more authentic, human and worthy society, with the aim that each individual to be valued and respected for their unique characteristics.

References

Barrios Hernández, K., Olivero Vega, E. J., Acosta Padro, J. C. (2017). *Gestión del conocimiento y capacidad de innovación Modelos, Sistemas y Aplicaciones [Management of knowledge and capacity of innovation. Models, Systems and Aplications]*. Universidad Simón Bolívar.

Cassells Martínez, R. A. (2019). *Análisis del modelo educativo y organizacional de Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU), desde la perspectiva Comunitaria e Intercultural, campus Bluefields, periodo 2007-2016*. [Tesis Doctoral, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua - Managua]. http://repositorio.unan.edu.ni/id/eprint/16036

Cassells, R. (2017). El modelo Educativo de la BICU: el caso de los estudiantes afrodescendientes e indígenas en la década 2007-2016 [The BICU's educational model: the case of afrodescendant and indegenous students on the decade of 2007 - 2016]. *Revista Científica de FAREM-Estelí. Medio Ambiente, Tecnología y Desarrollo Humano, 6*(23), 3–20.

Consejo Nacional de Universidades. (2022). Marco Estratégico de la Educación Superior 2022–2030 [Strategic framework of Higher Education 2022-2030]. https://cnu.edu.ni/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Marco-Estrategico-de-la-Educacion-Superior-2022-2030.

Constitución Política de la República de Nicaragua [Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua]. (1987). Managua, Nicaragua.

Leiva Olivencia, J., Márquez Pérez, M. (2012). La comunicación intercultural: una herramienta de inclusión en los contextos educativos de diversidad cultural [Intercultural communication: a tool of inclusion on the cultural diversity educational contexts]. *Revista de Pedagogía, 33*(93). http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=65930104006

Mereminskaya, E. (2011). El Convenio 169 de la OIT sobre pueblos indígenas y tribales: Derecho internacional y experiencias comparadas [The 169 Convention of the OIT about indigenous and tribal villages: International rights and compared experiences]. *Estudios públicos*, (121), 213-276.

Mendoza, J. F., & Flores-Pacheco, J. A. (2021). Competencias digitales en la formación continua del profesorado, un estudio de caso para la Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University - BICU, Nicaragua [Digital competencies on the continuous formation of the professorship, a case study for the Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University – BICU, Nicaragua]. *Revista Científica de FAREM-Estelí, 10*(39), 157–169. https://doi.org/10.5377/farem.v10i39.12621

Moraga López, J., Wong Serrano, J., Olivar Molina, S., & Allen Amador, T. T. (2022). Epistemología de los sistemas abiertos de la investigación [Epistemology of open systems of investigation]. *Índice, Revista de Educación de Nicaragua, 2*(4), 55–64.

Pellicer Palacín, M. (2008). La diversidad cultural en el aula: un reto, una oportunidad. XIX Congreso Internacional de la ASELE (Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera) [Cultural diversity on the classroom: a challenge, an opportunity. XIX Inernational Congress of the ASELE (Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extrajera].

Pérez Rivera, G. (2007). La evaluación de los aprendizajes [Learning evaluation]. *Reencuentro*.

Rodríguez-Gómez, D., Ion, G., Mercader, C., & López-Crespo, S. (2020). Factors promoting informal and formal learning strategies among school leaders [Factores que promueven estrategias de aprendizaje informales y formales entre los líderes escolares]. *Studies in Continuing Education, 42*(2), 1–15. https://doi.