

The right to Afro-centered education in Colombia to survive and thrive

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Multiple literacies approach should be a stimulus for the strengthening of the identity of children of African descent and the process of dismantling racism. This purpose implies commitment to fight anti-black racism, as well as the commitment to review the pillars that sustain it, this is: capitalist, imperialist, militarist and patriarchal power relations informed by the historical process of coloniality. In other words, the structural roots of racism need a change in order to expect the growth, flourish and prosperity for our seeds, our children.

This also means that being “black”, as a meaningless racial label, has to transcend to be African and African descent, effectively. The schools have an important role in these processes as they contribute to form intellectual understanding of historical, social and cultural contexts that provide individuals and collectives with critical skills, in addition to the technical skills, to shape outstanding professionals and well-informed citizens, participating in the economic, cultural, political and social life locally and globally.

In Colombia this is a real challenge. State Schools lack the diverse resources that are needed to achieve their purpose. This has an impact on the quality of teachers, curriculums, pedagogy and methodologies, and overall education policies and system. Furthermore, the challenges that schools and the education system face at this time in Colombia are presenting a serious challenge for the survival of Afro-descendant people in a self-proclaimed cultural and ethnically diverse country.

Two factors need to be considered in this situation: 1) the structural systemic practices of racism in the Colombian schools, that are doing the contrary to promote respect and values toward diversity, in detriment of opportunities for equal education. Racial discrimination in the schools where student population is majorly non-black or non-afro-descendant is common, naturalized and a routinary violent practice by authorities, teachers and non-black/afro-descendant students. One research directed by Afro-Colombian professor Maria Isabel Mena¹ in 2011 found that in schools with majority of white population, 70% of afro-descendant children had disciplinary problems due to the racist bullying they suffer. School authorities tend to ignore the bullying issue and treat the situation as disciplinary, making Afro-descendant children responsibly. The tendency on parents is to take them out of the school. This kind of drop-out is not properly documented and addressed by schools and authorities, and racism as the matter of the problem is easily ignored or not managed adequately.

The second factor to properly address the right to education for children of African descent is the violent environment they are living in.

Due to the extreme violence that has characterized the so-called internal armed conflict in Colombia, mostly encroaching communities and territories of Black/Afro-descendant people, afro-descendant children, in majority from 5 to 10 years-old, abandon schools frequently. The main determinants of school desertion are economic situation, violence, learning difficulties and social pressure. All these factors

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¹ <https://revistas.pedagogica.edu.co/index.php/PYS/article/view/780/752>

combined in a racialized person become one integral problem that the school system is not addressing. In consequence, afro-descendant school desertion is over 30% (CEPAL, 2020)².

For African descent children in Colombia, first is to survive, later to thrive. Life expectancy for Afro-Colombian youth is no more than 20 years-old; 36% of the Afro-Colombians killed in 2021 were between 17 and 21 years of age. Thrive and survive at the same time are a significant and very contradictory challenges because in order to survive in a brutally violent context, children almost have to no-exist, be invisible to avoid forced recruitment by state, guerrilla and criminal armed groups, being killed or have to kill, and being criminalized or guilty for their actions of survival, while in order to thrive they must struggle to be visible, make themselves worth and meaningful to society, complying with standards unsensitive to their culture and social needs.

After the Colombian constitutional amendment in 1991, Black/afro-descendants have the opportunity with Law 70 of 1993 to develop norms that include and institute afro-centered education or ethno-education.

The Black/Afro-descendant movement have advocated for normativity and policies to include in curriculums and pedagogy an afro-centered or ethno-educational multicultural and multi literacy approaches, translated into policies, plans, programs, infrastructure and specific budgets. The goal has been to have education programs that interrogated history and power relations that characterize the existence and practice of racism and obstruct their advancement, in order to have interpretive frameworks to make a critical meaning of the social conditions of Afro-Colombians, and create spaces for agency within the classroom and toward their lives.

Unfortunately, although significant achievements such the institution of the Afro-descendant Cathedra, the ruling to include Afro-descendants history and culture in the curriculums, and the recognition of the traditional *Palenquera language* as cultural patrimony, ethno-education still needs to be fully embraced and put it into practice by the education system.

We know that, a multiple literacies approach could allow for education to effectively contribute to build democratic societies that respect and promote diversity, equality and equity, by preparing teachers and students to directly participate and contribute to this building and the progressive dismantling of racism. This is why, beyond empty laws and policies, is needed a transformation of social conscience and political commitment.

In the context of systemic structural racism, the integration of multiple literacy experiences is influenced by how people of African descent are visually and cognitively represented “black” as a form of stigmatization and location on a human and social scale of being almost nothing, structuring an identity base on the non-being in the social and economic ladder, but visible and useful for the purpose of their exploitation to support the economic and social ladder of the rest of the society, specially, those privileged by the fact on non-being black, this is, being white.

Multiple literacies then are incompatible with white supremacy and racism, incompatible with silence and double-morality regarding racism and its lack of discussion and intellectual study for, and, in the state of affairs of school and education.

² https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46191/4/S2000226_es.pdf

We have to question what kind of visual literacy promotes visibility and worth to the lives of people stigmatized as “black” who, in the case of Afro-Colombians, are looking to link with their African roots to be recognized, respected and understood as people of African descent, in its very multidimensional and complex meaning.

I will conclude that, in the actual context of violence in Colombia, first, it is imperative to ensure the fundamental right to live, free of harm to their physical and human integrity, for Afro-Colombian children to believe that effectively they have a future to thrive for.

I want, finally, to end bringing some recommendations that Afro-Colombian teachers and researchers have made for the government, to be consider on the recommendations from this panel:

1. Assign specific and sufficient budget to promote teachers’ qualification and research that contribute to understand production and transmission of knowledge, as well as the educational realities and needs of Afro-Colombian children, in order to commit and develop Afro-centered literacy processes, in a school system that effectively responds to goals of the right to a proper education.
2. Develop meaningful campaigns that address issues and practices of anti-black racism in Colombia, looking to create consciousness and commitment to equity and anti-racism, as State responsibility not exclusive responsibility of Afro-Colombians.
3. Demonstrate determination and real political will to make the existing ethno-education laws, programs and policies practicable and effective.
4. Ensure that scholar texts and materials include images and visual elements that fully represent and value the cultural, social and historical context of Afro-Colombian children to properly promote diversity and their visibility.
5. Undertake the full implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Accord. To tackle violence in Afro-Colombian territories is critical to ensure stable conditions for Afro-descendant children survival and thrive in the educational system and beyond their 20 years of age.