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# Higher Education as a Pathway to Social Transformation and Development

Editorial by Robert Ojeda Pérez.

## Introduction

Education has long been recognized as the driving force behind human and social progress, dating back to the Enlightenment. In his essay *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), Immanuel Kant presented education as a means of emancipating individuals from ignorance and dependency. However, the current context in many Latin American countries reveals a stark contradiction: while education's potential is acknowledged, the necessary support for its development is denied. This disconnect is further exacerbated by policies that disregard diversity and inclusion, perpetuating the exclusion of vulnerable groups and hindering collective progress.

This essay examines inclusive practices in multicultural classrooms through case studies and the contributions of critical theories on race and education. Focusing on the Latin American reality, it argues for the transformation of educational systems to be inclusive, foster critical thinking, and promote research as a key tool for national development.

## 1. Education in the Enlightenment: Kant as a Starting Point

Kant asserted that education should enable individuals to achieve autonomy. His famous motto, *Sapere aude* (dare to know), advocates the use of reason free from prejudice. In the European context of the 18th century, this ideal was deeply tied to the centrality of reason and a Eurocentric civilisational project that excluded non-Western cultural realities.

In Latin America, these ideas arrived alongside independence movements but were only partially adapted. For instance, during the first half of the 19th century, nascent Latin American republics attempted to establish educational systems based on Enlightenment principles but faced challenges such as the exclusion of Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and women, who were not considered full subjects of educational rights.

In contrast to Kant's promotion of the universality of knowledge, education in Latin America has historically been elitist and exclusionary. This underscores the need to re-examine how Enlightenment ideas can be reinterpreted from a multicultural and critical perspective.

## **2. Inclusive Practices in Multicultural Classrooms: Reflections from Latin America and Asia-Pacific**

In Colombia and the Philippines, cultural diversity is an inherent aspect of their social realities. However, the ways in which their educational systems have addressed this diversity offer valuable lessons on inclusive practices in multicultural classrooms.

In Colombia, the *Escuela Nueva* model emerged as a response to the needs of rural and marginalised communities. This participatory and innovative approach transformed the traditional curriculum by adapting it to local contexts, allowing students to learn through projects and collaborative activities. Beyond academic outcomes, this model has fostered greater social cohesion, demonstrating how inclusive education can bridge historical inequities.

In the Philippines, a country with over 7,000 islands and notable cultural richness, the challenges of inclusion are also significant. The *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)* programme aims to strengthen cultural identity by teaching children in their native languages during the early years of schooling. This approach not only enhances initial academic performance but also respects local identities in a country where English and Filipino dominate urban spaces.

Both cases illustrate that inclusive education transcends general policies. It requires specific adaptations to local realities and a genuine commitment to cultural diversity as an asset, not a barrier. These models demonstrate the potential to build inclusive multicultural classrooms by promoting dialogue, respecting differences, and valuing each community's identity.

## **3. Critical Theories of Race and Education: Reflections from Latin America and the Philippines**

Inclusive education must draw upon theoretical frameworks that analyse and challenge structures of exclusion. Critical theories of race and education provide key tools for understanding how racism and other forms of oppression manifest in educational systems and how they can be dismantled.

In Latin America, figures like Paulo Freire have illuminated the path forward. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire emphasised that education should not be an act of transmission but one of emancipation. This principle remains fundamental for Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Colombia, who seek a pedagogy that not only acknowledges their struggles but also grants them an active voice in the educational process.

From a Filipino perspective, the legacies of Spanish and American colonialism have left deep scars on the educational system. Although critical race theories have not been as

prominent in the Philippines as in Latin America, postcolonial studies have opened spaces to reflect on how colonial structures have shaped educational narratives. Scholars like Epifanio San Juan Jr. have emphasised the need to decolonise educational thought in the Philippines, highlighting how local knowledge systems can underpin a more equitable and contextualised education.

These perspectives, while separated by geography and culture, converge on an essential truth: education must be a space of resistance and transformation. From Colombia to the Philippines, critical theories and pedagogical practices that promote equity can form the core of structural change benefiting future generations.

#### **4. Education as a Driver of Development: The Challenges of Financing Youth Research**

Education and research are intrinsically linked to national development. However, in many Latin American countries, inadequate funding and ineffective public policies limit young people's access to higher education and research opportunities.

For instance, while countries like Brazil have implemented programmes such as *Science without Borders* to train researchers, these efforts have been insufficient to transform

educational realities in contexts of inequality. In contrast, Finland has positioned itself as a leader in education through sustained investment in research and teacher training.

The lack of government support in Latin American countries reflects not only political negligence but also a missed opportunity to harness the creative and transformative potential of youth.

#### **5. Proposal for Improvement: Towards an Inclusive and Sustainable Educational Model**

To construct an inclusive and sustainable educational system, the following strategies should be implemented:

Increase investment in education and research. Establish public funding policies that guarantee access to higher education.

Promote inclusion from basic education. Encourage pedagogical practices that value cultural and linguistic diversity.

Incorporate critical theories into teacher training. Prepare educators to address structural inequalities.

Forge public-private partnerships. Engage the business sector in funding educational and research projects.



Transforming educational systems in Latin America requires a concerted effort among governments, educational institutions, and civil society. However, young people play a central role in this struggle: they must demand not only funding from governments but also the respect for their educational rights, rejecting political manipulation that reduces their aspirations to mere tools of electoral control.

Inclusive and critical education is the pathway to sustainable development and social justice. Only when young voices rise in strength, demanding education that respects their diversity and fosters their potential, will it be possible to build more equitable societies free from poverty, ideology, and exclusion. It is their future at stake, and it is their right to claim it.

Higher education is, without doubt, one of the most robust pillars for individual progress and the sustainable development of nations. In this special issue of *DiversidadES*, we highlight the academic collaboration between students at La Salle University in Colombia and La Salle University in the Philippines, who, from their respective contexts, address topics related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and explore their points of convergence and divergence. This exchange not only enriches mutual understanding but also demonstrates the transformative power of education in a globalised world.

However, this reflection cannot be separated from the realities of both countries, where the promises of progress have often been trapped in political rhetoric and ideological illusions that fail to translate into concrete actions. The youth of Colombia and the Philippines share a common aspiration: to access quality education that enables them not only to develop as professionals but also to act as agents of change in their communities. Higher education must be a space for critique, innovation, and research—a place where ideas capable of transforming the economic, social, and political systems perpetuating inequality and exclusion can take root.

Despite the challenges, it is important to remind students that change is possible. History shows that great transformations often begin with small steps taken in educational spaces. The dialogue between the youth of the Philippines and Colombia presented in this issue is compelling evidence that knowledge can build bridges, transcend borders, and propose innovative solutions to global problems. Yet this potential can only be fully realised when educational institutions receive the financial support, autonomy, and respect for diversity they need to thrive.

We urge governments and institutions: respect the right of young people to education. Guaranteeing their access to quality higher education is not a favour but a moral obligation and a

strategic investment in the future. Likewise, we encourage students not to lose hope or motivation. Their voices, ideas, and projects have the power to transform reality. From the classroom, with rigorous critical thinking and a commitment to collective action, they can build a better future for their countries and the world.

May this special issue serve as a testament to the potential that emerges when borders blur and young people become leaders of change. Education is not just a tool; it is the path to social justice, economic prosperity, and political equity. Let us move forward together towards a world that is more diverse, inclusive, and full of opportunities!

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