# Social Exclusion of Afro-Colombian Children in the School Classroom from a Bioethical Approach\*

Exclusión social de la infancia afrocolombiana en el aula escolar desde un enfoque bioético

Exclusão social da infância afro-colombiana na sala de aula escolar desde uma abordagem bioética

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#### Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on social exclusion, presenting the problem from an actual case of an Afro-Colombian child in an elementary school classroom. Although there are studies about this phenomenon, it is important to consolidate the processes of research and reflection on the possible manifestations and consequences of this case. In the second section, the paper demonstrates that the phenomenon of social exclusion in the Afro-Colombian community has transcended from generation to generation throughout history. Finally, the paper analyzes the issue from a bioethics approach to reach its analysis based on the basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report, namely justice and respect for people.

#### Keywords

childhood; social discrimination; social justice

#### Resumen

# Palabras clave

infancia; discriminación social; justicia social Este artículo tiene como propósito reflexionar sobre la exclusión social, planteando el pro-blema desde un caso real de un niño afrocolombiano vinculado al aula escolar en el nivel de básica primaria. Si bien existen estudios sobre este fenómeno, es conveniente afianzar los procesos de investigación y reflexión sobre las manifestaciones y las consecuencias que se pueden dar ante este caso. En un segundo momento, se demuestra que el fenó-meno de exclusión social, en la población afrocolombiana, ha transcendido de generación en generación a través de la historia. Por último, se analiza el problema desde la bioética, para llegar a su análisis desde los principios éticos básicos del Informe Belmont, que son justicia y respeto por las personas.

#### Resumo

Este artigo visa refletir sobre a exclusão social, colocando o problema desde um caso real de uma criança afro-colombiana vinculada à sala de aula escolar no Ensino Fun-damental. Bem se existem estudos sobre esse fenômeno, convém consolidar os pro-cessos de pesquisa e reflexão sobre as manifestações e as consequências possíveis nesse caso. Em seguida, demonstramos que o fenômeno de exclusão social, na popu-lação afro-colombiana, tem transcendido de geração em geração através da história. Finalmente, analisamos o problema desde a bioética, levando em conta os princípios éticos básicos do Informe Belmont, que são justiça e respeito pelas pessoas.

#### Palavras-chave

infância; discriminação social; justiça social

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School is a privileged environment for the study of the learning of social relevance, of cultural differences, where social exclusion of Afro-Colombian children can be generated (Castillo, 2009). Educational institutions play an important role in the reproduction of inequalities. However, at the same time, they include great possibilities of transforming them (Buile, 2007). This paper is a theoretical contribution still under construction, which aims to propose a reflection on some fundamental aspects when addressing the social exclusion of Afro-descendant children linked to the school classroom.

In Colombian primary schools, the presence of Afro-Colombians is associated with stereotypes related to the construction of the country's racialized geography, its social categorization, and the reproduction of inequalities (Almeida & Ramírez, 2010). Usually, racial discrimination is expressed in the form of exclusion and violence, is not manifested openly, but acquires a symbolic nature (Meertens, 2008).

The problem of Afro-Colombians socially excluded linked to the school classroom is analyzed, raising some of the questions and considerations that can be provided from a bioethics approach to conduct an analysis based on the principle of respect for persons and principle of justice. This research does not intend, then, to offer a solution or a group of solutions, it only seeks to call to reflection. The initial intention of this article does not include an exhaustive review of all socio-anthropological, economic, or political implications. This analysis is necessary to conduct such a review, which would pose new questions, new scenarios, and possible solutions. An analysis considering the perspective of cultural diversity and addressing social exclusion in the school classroom of Afro-Colombian children is required (Buffa, 2007).

# A local experience

Based on an experience in a public institution in the city of Neiva (Huila), specifically in a commune of great social conflicts, such as poverty, family violence, insecurity, unemployment, dysfunctional families, abandonment, and child abuse. An Afro-Colombian student, whose pseudonym is Juan, enrolled in this institution. On Juan's first day, his eyes showed fear; fear of being rejected. At the beginning of the school period, no one interacted with him: during his break hours, he ate the school snack and stayed close to his teacher, who was very nice to him. The teacher began raising awareness by talking about people's individual differences and the value of respect. The message reached some children, who began to welcome him. However, other children, did not even allow him to get near them.

Despite the welcoming, Juan was very resistant to establishing relationships with his classmates. Sometimes, he was aggressive, but mostly, he isolated himself from the group. Consequently, Juan was frequently reprimanded by other teachers, without justified reason in front of his classmates.

Eventually, Juan did not return to school. His teacher met and spoke to his parents, but they told them that he did not want to return and that they were going to move to the rural area. Several weeks after this meeting, the school found out that the boy hangs out on the streets of the commune with his little brothers, playing barefoot all day, without any adult supervision, with dirty clothes, and facing the risk of being runover by a vehicle.

## Social exclusion

The concept of social exclusion was introduced to the social sciences to indicate the groups of individuals and populations excluded from development. In the contemporary world, it refers to the human condition of individuals and collectivities belonging to societies with increasing breakdown of social cohesion and marginalization. Social exclusion is, therefore, an actual problem people and social groups face, which can be the object of concrete policy actions by states or organized and powerful social movements, but it is also the object of knowledge generated by various areas of human and social sciences (Schramm, 2008).

For the Social Movement of Black Communities (1998), exclusion is not acknowledging that a person has opportunities and rights because they are racially different from the majority of the population. They also understand it as the degree of intolerance that society has toward some community that has discrepancies in terms of social behavioral styles.

It is impossible to ignore that social exclusion is not only caused by racism, as in the case discussed in this research, but also by other factors, such as gender discrimination, ethnicity, disability, poverty, HIV/AIDS, armed conflicts, among others, that are given by stereotypes built in society.

# Social exclusion in education

According to Fleury (2003), in Colombia, as in the rest of Latin America, school exclusion has ceased to be seen as a normal situation and is part of the "new social question"; a problem that demands answers from the Government and society. Despite existing policies favoring the respect of individual differences, there are still some students who hold old-fashioned ideas, where the notion of respect of individual differences is skewed.

Peñaflor and Jara (2009) suggest that education can be an important resource to fight discrimination, exclusion, and consolidate the foundations of inclusion, providing comprehensive training to individuals and giving them the necessary resources to live as a full member of society. It achieves this task when it has cultural relevance; when it values diversity as a source and resource of development; and when it generates open spaces for dialogue, coexistence, and the construction of equity.

It is often argued that education should help reduce poverty and inequality, promote social mobility, and improve the living conditions of people and societies. Likewise, in the educational field, there is talk of interculturality, referring to an ideal, "a should be or a utopian project that seeks to improve asymmetric relationships between cultures to generate more dialogic exchanges" (Zabala, Cusihuamán, & Cuenca, 2005). However, to create equity relationships between "cultures", it is necessary to reflect on the conditions that make it unfeasible in practice, review the roots of social inequalities in access to materials and symbolic resources; and a proposal to overcome these inequalities (Hirmas & Blanco, 2008).

According to Hirmas and Blanco (2008), cultural diversity is represented in Latin America and the Caribbean by 150 million Afro-descendants, a third of the entire Latin American population, who arrived on the continent through the slave trade. Ninety million African Americans live in poverty, representing 40% of the total people living in poverty in the region. Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela concentrate 80% of the Afro-descendants of Latin America. Their demands for public policies are framed in the recommendations of the 3<sup>RD</sup> World Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Together with ethnic plurality, the acknowledgement of racial plurality as a constituent of nations has been a fact that has only begun to gain strength at the end of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century, as is the case of the Political Constitution of Colombia of 1991.

Since the Declaration of Human Rights (1948), a series of international conventions and treaties have laid the foundations of international law in defense of the equal rights of people and the fight against discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national origin. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) reaffirms the falsehood, the morally condemnable, and socially unjust and dangerous of any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation. An important milestone was the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas in 1977, where the appreciation for African American culture was established, as well as the relevance of conducting studies and research on cultural elements of African descent and their incorporation into the field of education.

Although cultural diversity is the natural environment in which people function, commonly accepted development models have paid little attention to it. Therefore, a renewed dialogue between culture and development is required. From this perspective, countries' challenge is to provide basic conditions of equity that allow expanding the choices that should be offered to all, while respecting the wishes of indigenous peoples, African Americans, migrants, religious minorities, and others, to achieve comprehensive global development beyond social, cultural, and health aspects, as well as educational conditions such as those set forth in this paper (Hirmas & Blanco, 2008).

Year after year, students have sought to foster respect for differences and change the mind-set of new generations regarding the scourge of racism and stimulate a negotiated solution of disputes inside and outside of the classroom, through community outreach (Hirmas & Blanco, 2008). However, some discriminatory biases against cultural diversity in the classroom are still observed, often originating in their family composition and influenced by their social context or the educational agents themselves.

## Effects of Social Exclusion on Afro-Colombian Children

Some of the main negative effects of social exclusion, in the Afro-Colombian school environment, include aggressiveness, dropouts, bullying, and psychological problems (Garcés, 2004). Afro-Colombian children who suffer social exclusion in school can exhibit school refusal behavior, dropout behaviors, autonomy problems, insecurity, aggressiveness, and fear of facing challenges arising in their daily lives. The latter three conditions sometimes persist until adulthood (Castillo & Caicedo, 2012; Parada, 2005).

The various negative effects undermine the fundamental instrumental freedoms (economic opportunities, political freedoms, social security services, guarantee of transparency, safety, and security). Expanding these freedoms, according to Sen (2000), is indispensable to development since they are the means Afro-Colombian children learn to do what they value in life and exercise their agency and autonomy. A wholesome life is negatively affected by social exclusion in developing countries, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, which have neither achieved a full and comprehensive education nor a welfare state for all or the majority of its inhabitants.

Respect and tolerance are the values that are most negatively affected by social exclusion based on race. In other words, failure to respect differences, framed within decision-making as a result of prejudices, social stereotypes, and racial intolerance, refers to distrusting people with dif-

ferent physical and cultural characteristics from your own and, even, disregarding them. This implies abusive or discriminatory behaviors against people because of their imagined inferiority, to the point of reaching a "moral violence" that, according to Segato (2013), is called the set of mechanisms legitimized by custom to ensure the preservation of relative status systems in terms of race, but which are also within the control of the permanence of hierarchies of other orders, such as gender, ethnic, class, regional, and national.

Social exclusion in the classroom can generate moral violence based on emotional aggression, even if peers or teachers do not do it consciously or deliberately. Afro-Colombian children are exposed to ridicule, moral coercion, suspicion, intimidation, condemned because of their lineage, daily contempt for them as human beings, their personality, their psychological traits, their body, their intellectual abilities, their work, their moral values. This type of violence can often occur without any verbal aggression, manifesting exclusively with gestures, attitudes, looks. Oppressive behavior is generally perpetrated by classmates, other children, classroom teachers, and other institutional staff.

# The History of Social Exclusion from the History of the "Afro-Colombian"

It is important to clarify and specify the different terms used to reference this population group. Afro-Colombian, black, and negritude are terms used, on numerous occasions, interchangeably, without being clear of what is the appropriate reference according to the historical, legal, regional and political context; regardless of the implications of using one or the other.

Inside and outside the Afro-Colombian communities, there has been a wide debate -which has not yet been resolved- about which is their appropriate ethnonym. Afro-Colombian has been the term with which the acknowledgement of the cultural and ethnic value of these communities with African footprints has been sought; nevertheless, detractors of this term have indicated that it is a euphemism that hides the negative past and practices of discrimination from the colonial context to the present time. For this reason, some movements have called themselves negritude to emphasize the pejorative burden and the negative imaginary around the "black" skin color, which made this colonial category a legitimizing device of social marginalization, which must be acknowledged while a process of resignification of black and Afro-Colombian contributions to building the Colombian nation is carried out (Ministry of Culture, 2010).

The situation and problem of the Afro-Colombian population is characterized by the exploitation of their workforce in hard labor jobs, the dispossession of their lands, lack of educational opportunities, poverty. They suffer from racial discrimination and exclusion in their daily lives; hence, they hold an incomplete citizenship as a result of the violation of their human rights (Mosquera, 2001). The serious economic, social, cultural, educational, political, and spiritual consequences caused by slavery are alive and well within Colombian society. The foregoing coupled with the imbalances, insecurities, and injustices of a capitalist economic and social development model victimize the Afro-descendant populations. The official figures of the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) (2016) reveal that the department of Chocó, where most of its population is of Afro-Colombian, has the highest rate of monetary poverty, where the basic market basket is less than \$114,692 Colombian pesos.

According to the Colombian Ministry of Culture (2010), education indicators show higher illiteracy rates for the Afro-Colombian population of 4.5 percentage points with respect to the rest of the country's population. Illiteracy occurs especially in its rural population. School absenteeism rates are higher with respect to the total population, a situation that is worsening among the youngest and in those associated with higher education. Additionally, the Afro-Colombian population older than 15 years has an average of fewer years of schooling compared to the total population, with a higher incidence in women.

# Bioethical Approach to Social Exclusion Based on Racism in School

Social exclusion, in particular, is the object of study of applied ethics and bioethics. Bioethics serves as a guide and legitimizes social policies themselves in accordance with some existing value system or –said more realistically– the result of any agreement between agents of different and conflicting value systems (as is the case in most democratic and pluralistic societies).

As an object of study, it constitutes one of the most discussed transdisciplinary topics in ethics, politics, and human and social sciences, in general. It relates to other concepts, such as damage, poverty, marginalization, capacities, access to health services, labor market, education, distribution of resources, quality of life, justice, equity, solidarity, responsibility, citizenship, democracy, protection (Schramm, 2008).

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Social exclusion can be characterized as a form of lacking various aspects of human life: material, psychic, family, social, and cultural with varying degrees of impact on the well-being of individuals, populations, nations, and entire regions of the planet. It may refer, for example, to the lack of access to formal human rights (such as recognition of citizenship in the case of those that do not have documentary proof of citizenship) or to fundamental human rights such as the right to life, food, health, housing, work, protection, education, culture, poverty, prolonged unemployment, and other deficiencies that, directly or indirectly, prevent people and social groups the effective exercise of their citizenship, such as voting and participation in economic and political decisions that significantly affect their quality of life.

Today, social exclusion concerns the majority of the world's population and is exhibiting an increasing trend in the world's developed and developing societies as shown by national and international indicators. It may worsen in the future because of new emerging and pressing problems, such as those related to the quality of the environment (Schramm, 2008).

From a moral point of view, exclusion evidences the transformation of a citizen's identity, understood as a moral and political agent consisting of a moral, vulnerable, and non-integrated person (Veca, 2005), who lacks the necessary conditions to exercise their decision-making abilities and functions (Sen, 2004). From a moral and political viewpoint, Schramm (2008) asserts that social exclusion is linked to the culture of human rights and refers to the various generations of rights: individual or first generation rights; social or second generation rights; and those including environmental rights and rights of future generations or third generation rights.

Bioethics is expanding to different knowledge areas, besides medicine. This reflection emphasizes the area of education. Bioethics has an inclusive discourse that allows not having to approach the problem of racism exclusively from the law. Escobar Triana (2002) indicates that problems must be "understood to try to solve them through agreements and ethical criteria facilitating compliance with those laws" (p. 14). He asserts that, "a bioethical, rational, and secular reflection is necessary, in which different approaches to life and human relationships intervene" (p. 15).

Bioethics as a decision-making norm is spread throughout the social context to reasonably counteract imbalances arising from discrimination based on race, gender, religion, social, economic, or political status, etc., which constitute a high risk for social coexistence.

This bioethical reflection is based on the case presented at the beginning and on two ethical principles of the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979): respect for persons and justice. These principles function as a justification to evaluate the actions or behaviors of the different actors involved in the racial phenomenon in the school, which are presented below.

# Respect for Persons

Respect for Afro-Colombian children, and persons in general, is based on two ethical convictions. First, they should be treated as autonomous agents. Second, given a situation where their autonomy is diminished or absent, they have the right to be protected. Thus, the principle of respect for persons is divided into two separate moral requirements: 1) recognizing autonomy, which is when they can perform on their own, age and sociocultural-appropriate tasks and activities; and 2) protecting those with diminished or absent autonomy, which is when they do not have the capacity to make decisions and act accordingly, which is why the child has the right to an expressly and legally appointed representative.

Respecting autonomy means giving value to autonomous opinions and choices, while avoiding hindering actions, unless these are clearly a detriment to others. When a child has not yet developed their autonomy, it is the parent or guardian who fosters social stereotypes mediating their children's social relationships in different environments. The lack of respect for differences among students toward Afro-Colombian students because of their skin color is reflected on repudiating the latter's decisions. According to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979):

The ability to make their own decisions matures throughout an individual's life and some individuals, totally or partially lose this capacity due to illness, mental disability, or circumstances that severely limit their freedom. (p. 4)

In Juan's case, this principle is violated by some of his classmates, despite the teacher raising awareness and contextualizing the class on the importance of respect for differences of all persons, as well as on prejudice and moral violence because of social stereotypes. One possible explanation for this outcome is that this principle is also affected by decisions that are exogenous to an individuals' autonomy. Children act in accordance with the influence and teachings of their parents, from generation to generation.

This concurs with Nussbaum (2008), who suggests that social constructions of emotion are transmitted through encouragement, actions,

and parental instructions, long before society shapes the child. Children are taught what and who to fear, which moments of anger are reasonable, and which behavior is embarrassing. This author also asserts racial hatred would cease if not for certain preexisting perceptions, such as people whose skin color is different, are threatening, dangerous, or bad. By shaping how children see things, human beings face these social conventions, which can be discriminatory or violent.

It should be highlighted that this population that excludes, is becoming smaller as a result of the implementation of pedagogical policies and strategies to protect human rights, mainly children's rights.

In the case at hand, two moral dilemmas arise regarding this principle. First, the child dropping out of school of his own volition and with his parents' consent. Second, the teacher's responsibility regarding the protection of the right to education of that minor. What decision would you make if you were the teacher, the child, or the parent?

### Justice

The principle of justice is that each person be given what is their own or owed to them. Aristotle indicates that justice is not giving each person what they deserve, but rather it consists in knowing a human being from their three different principles: reason, value, and sensitive appetite (Aristotle, 1988); in society, the reason is teachers; courage, classmates, and sensitive appetite, excluded students.

Beauchamp and Childress (1999) state that justice requires an equal distribution of benefits and burdens, which avoids discrimination and injustice in school policies and interactions. The theory of justice, as part of the legal-political philosophy, is a critical theory of legitimacy systems. Every theory of justice thus includes a theory of legitimacy, and it is precisely values (Sánchez-Valverde, 2013) that connect both notions.

Justice is related at two levels: social and individual. Talking about social justice establishes a principle of life in common and, in this sense, relates to the field of law and legislation, which seeks to meet the needs of the people within society. On the other hand, individual justice seeks to meet the needs of a specific person or group.

Juan's particular case refers to individual justice since all Afro-Colombian children linked to the school classroom have the right to be treated equally despite their individual differences. Social justice goes hand in hand with social inequality, which aggravates the conditions of the poor. Social justice generally refers to political, social, and economic inequality. In a school setting, like in Juan's case, from this social perspective, what is fair is that any student, despite their differences in gender, race, religion, etc., is recognized and encouraged for their achievements and abilities, rather than their deficiencies. For example, if a student studied hard for an exam and performed outstandingly, they should be given the highest corresponding grade. Instead, if a student cheats, they should receive the lowest corresponding grade. Similarly, it is appropriate for children, who have won a competition, be it in sports or any other, receive the corresponding award without discrimination. Furthermore, fair is that all children receive education, have leisure time to have fun, and have someone who takes care of them responsibly and affectionately, without prejudice. On the contrary, it is completely unfair for children to be forced to drop out of school because of situations of moral violence or lack of concern from their parents or, worse, as a result of child labor.

## Conclusions

In short, educational exclusion is a historical, cultural, and social process. It is a symbolic dimension that is played in institutions that leads to the denial of human plurality. Consequently, human plurality in schools implies recognizing children's uniqueness and enabling their own discourse and actions. It also means building plurality as a condition of all political life and not only the universalization of access to the educational system. It is the recognition of one of the main inherent differences of human beings: diversity, a dynamic and changing lifestyle, from which an individual builds their own identity. Hence, to eliminate exclusion in education, diversity education is required ensuring the right to one's own identity, respecting one another for who they are, with their biological, social, cultural, and personality characteristics, which precisely allow the individuation of a person in society.

Social exclusion is a relevant object of bioethics, as this field deals with the descriptive and regulatory view of human practices substantially affecting third parties. Within this approach, it is important to contemplate the principle of responsibility that falls on the adult population as the main designer of the future, specifically parents and teachers. Within this context, they will be the primary agents that will have the task of minimizing the conflicts arising within the school classroom based on social exclusion, where the integrity of Afro-Colombian children may be affected, and of recognizing them as subjects of rights.

Based on the bioethical reflection, the ethical principles of justice and respect for persons, within the particular school context, as pillars stand-

ing for a decent living for all, lead to feasible consensuses, among other things, of the social state of law and justice with full educational social inclusion, in other words, they help reduce inequalities and discrimination and promote the exercise of respect for individual differences of children, based on values and human rights, where agreements or compromises are reached.

For a long time, it was believed that the priority was to promote equal access to school, a matter of quantity, but today, we know that this is not enough. It is necessary to ensure the success of each student based on their individual characteristics.

Parents and teachers play an active role in the production and maintenance of social inclusion conditions, which can promote critical postures and profound transformative actions breaking the structural and symbolic processes involved in social exclusion.

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