Addressing inclusive education in the context of the pandemic: a systematic review

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Abstract

The research focused on the development of a systematic review of different studies carried out by other authors in which the barriers, limitations and actions implemented to address this problem have been analyzed. A non-experimental methodological design with a qualitative approach was applied; In this case, techniques were applied for the search, selection, and analysis of the different referential articles so that they met the criteria of scientific relevance. A total of ten articles were reviewed, among which similar results were found that reflected the prevalence of educational inequalities that affect students with disabilities to a greater extent; In addition, it is suggested that although policies and actions aimed at guaranteeing inclusive education have been implemented, they are still minimal or insufficient to face different scenarios. It was concluded that in order to guarantee inclusion it is essential to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities, recognize the barriers that still prevail and take measures to reduce and gradually eradicate them, for this the involvement of the State, all actors of the educational system and society in general is required.

Keywords: Education; distance education; inclusive education; teaching; educational resources.
Resumen

La investigación se centró en el desarrollo de una revisión sistemática de diferentes estudios realizados por otros autores en los que se han analizado las barreras, limitaciones y acciones implementadas para abordar este problema. Se aplicó un diseño metodológico no experimental con enfoque cualitativo; En este caso, se aplicaron técnicas para la búsqueda, selección y análisis de los diferentes artículos referenciales para que cumplieran con los criterios de relevancia científica. Se revisaron un total de diez artículos, entre los cuales se encontraron resultados similares que reflejaron la prevalencia de desigualdades educativas que afectan en mayor medida a los estudiantes con discapacidad; Además, se sugiere que si bien se han implementado políticas y acciones dirigidas a garantizar la educación inclusiva, aún son mínimas o insuficientes para enfrentar diferentes escenarios. Se concluyó que para garantizar la inclusión es fundamental atender las necesidades específicas de los estudiantes con discapacidad, reconocer las barreras que aún prevalecen y tomar medidas para reducirlas y erradicarlas gradualmente, para ello se requiere la participación del Estado, de todos los actores del sistema educativo y de la sociedad en general.

Palabras clave: Educación; educación a distancia; educación inclusiva; enseñanza; Recursos educativos.
Introduction

At the global level, inclusive education is part of the United Nations 2030 agenda, which outlines the objectives and actions to be taken to eliminate the barriers that limit access to people with disabilities to quality training that meets their specific needs. In this sense, inclusion is the fundamental axis of this planning, since it seeks to eradicate the different forms of exclusion, segregation, discrimination, and inequality that for decades have affected the most vulnerable populations, especially children and adolescents with disabilities. However, there are different socioeconomic, political and/or environmental factors that can influence education systems and accentuate existing gaps, so these challenges need to be addressed to implement effective actions to guarantee this universal right (Higuera & Pacheco, 2022; Laderas et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, the governments of different countries around the world had to implement restrictive measures to avoid a possible exponential increase in the rate of infections, this resulted in the temporary closure of educational centers which affected approximately 1100 million students. As a response mechanism, digital tools were used to manage distance education processes; However, families with children and adolescents with disabilities experienced greater difficulties in accessing the resources required to continue their education in the context of confinement, which exacerbated the existing gap and accentuated the problems that until now have prevented ensuring inclusive education for all students (Cruz & Hernández, 2022; Andrade, 2021).

The abrupt transition to distance learning caused significant disruption to be teaching and learning processes aimed at students with disabilities. It was also influenced by the fact that this segment of students could no longer gain access at home to the resources provided in the classroom and some did not have the necessary autonomy to interact with educators through virtual means. Various socially responsible educational bodies managed to support the learning process by offering various forms of alternative activities that partially avoided these difficulties, although not all educational needs were met (Bonilla & Sánchez, 2022; Roa et al., 2022; Comisión Económica para América
Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL; Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura, UNESCO, 2020).

At the juncture of the pandemic and post-pandemic, the focus has shifted not only to traditional forms of education, but also to the issue of inclusive education. At present, the path towards the full participation of students with disabilities in regular schools and in different areas of society has become one of the priorities of State policy in many countries. Therefore, a significant improvement of education systems is needed, for this it must be taken into account that the dynamics of discussion and implementation of the principle of inclusion must contemplate the different contexts in which students with disabilities operate, to anticipate possible eventualities that could limit their access to education (Azorín & Martínez, 2023).

According to González, et al., it is necessary to reflect on the impacts caused by the pandemic on inclusive education and the experiences of students with disabilities, since from this the necessary guidelines could be obtained to establish future lines of action, particularly in relation to the application of new efficient policies that promote inclusion in all educational institutions. Consequently, this article seeks to identify how inclusive education was addressed during the health crisis, for which a bibliographic review is carried out that will allow us to know the reality in which this problem arose in various countries (Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Theoretical foundation

It is argued that inclusion can be understood in different ways according to philosophical traditions, exemplifying in the neoliberal exegeses of equity in teaching that have generated validity after the turn of the century interpreting equity as the achievement of excellence and quality in teaching results. On the other hand, to determine inclusive education as the participation of all students and parents who make up an educational center and how they should be responsible for the diversity of their represented. That is, when talking about participation refers to the action of taking part in decision-making, being recognized and accepted for what each individual is, avoiding
being part of a single set (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2019; Echeita, 2020).

Considering the above, it is necessary that education is inclusive during early childhood, this is due to the favoring of child development confirming an essential preparation for the educational trajectory in which it will be developed. From a technical point of view, a neurodevelopment is fully identified during the first years of existence, establishing the formation of an individual with the full use of their potential, contributing to the reduction of economic, social discrepancies within the environment. However, it should be considered that the confinement due to the pandemic in which the physical and mental health of children was affected, as a result of the prolonged closures of educational centers had adverse consequences within the educational conditions which impacted the integral development, interactions and learning, known that have been required with greater effort for the continuation of educational development in the different stages (Fullan, et al., 2020; Guaman et al., 2020).

Distance education in the context of the pandemic has emerged from the Covid-19 categorizing in the distribution of learning being very different from the traditional, in this information and communication technology tools are used, the realization of educational strategies generated that students access an education regardless of where they are. Showing that it has not been an easy task to change the impartation of knowledge in a traditional way to a digital form, since it was done as the days of confinement arose. It should be considered that each of the educational institutions generated its own strategies, trying to ensure the development in each knowledge (Martínez et al., 2020; Plena Inclusión, 2020).

The pedagogical practices that strengthen inclusive education such as the presence of each one, followed by their participation in all learning experiences, make sense when they emphasize that the game is the main methodology of initial education, despite this the same does not arise when there is an online education that is to say not physical. At this point, the only ones close to carrying out these activities and supervising that they are fulfilled are the parents or the people who have them under their care, generating complications, since they do not have the same skills and abilities to carry out these
activities as would the teacher specialized in their areas (Pastran et al., 2020; Palomino et al., 2020).

Educational activities in the family environment have maintained their difficulties, this was due to the mixture with the domestic routine, on the other hand, online education was affected since there were homes that did not have an environment conducive to learning, considering that in Latin American countries there are families whose homes do not have basic services, presenting that of ten families surveyed only four had access to the internet, limiting participation in virtual education, added to the above. The unknown preparation of families in supporting that the new educational activities are formal within the home, directed by educators, has generated as a consequence the deprivation of interpersonal contacts, having lack of early stimuli to expand languages, the decrease in contact with the environment making it only coexist with peer groups or extended to 5 members has restricted the development of children's abilities, being a challenge for the educational system in which they must carry out strategic modalities in which an educational system with an inclusive approach is supported (Gutiérrez, 2020; Hidalgo, 2020).

Methods

The research was based on the analysis of the different ways of approaching inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic, to collect the required information, a non-experimental methodological design was applied, since it sought to know the aspects associated with the problem situation as they developed during the health crisis. From this perspective, a systematic review was carried out through which the results of the available primary studies on this topic were summarized, which were carefully selected in order to provide a high level of evidence on the effectiveness of the interventions and/or actions carried out, as well as the main challenges faced by teachers and students with disabilities in the context of confinement.

According to its scope, the research was descriptive which made it possible to collect in-depth data on the phenomenon of study analyzed, so that it was possible to answer the following questions: how was inclusive education developed during the pandemic?
what were the main challenges to address inclusive education under the online modality?, How were students with disabilities affected?, What was the perception of those involved?, What were the conclusions of other authors in the context of this topic?,

According to his approach, the research was qualitative and worked with a documentary study modality, this implied the selection of secondary sources of information whose main findings were synthesized and analyzed in a comparative way to establish the conclusions of the case. For the search and selection of sources, systematic strategies were used through which it was possible to choose the contents of greatest relevance for the research based on the use of keywords: inclusive education, inclusive education in pandemic, inclusive education during the health crisis, education and pandemic.

In this case, databases of scientific journals and the google scholar platform were used. To filter the documents, selection and source discard criteria were used, as detailed below:

**Selection criteria:**

- Scientific articles.
- Articles published in indexed journals.
- Articles published in the last three years.
- Articles in Spanish.
- Case studies, systematic review, empirical studies.

**Discard criteria:**

- Articles from newspapers or journals not indexed.
- Opinion pieces published in blogs.
- Thesis, monographs or reports.

From a comprehensive search of available publications, we performed a synthesis of the evidence that provided a basis for informed decisions or further
research. Categories of analysis were established to answer the questions asked as shown in Table No. 1, allowing the results of several studies to be combined to obtain a single estimate. Subsequently, a discussion was held, and conclusions were formulated regarding the subject analyzed.

**Table 1:** Number of items found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Nº of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles and challenges</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies applied</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives of those involved</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

The inclusion and exclusion criteria allowed the selection of a total of ten scientific articles, whose main contributions are set out below:

**Obstacles and challenges**

The available literature in relation to this category was larger compared to studies addressing other dimensions. In this case, of the total number of reference studies reviewed, four had as their main objective to identify the main barriers and challenges that affected the approach to inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic; That is to say, most of the research focused on the analysis of the problem and the perspectives of those involved. On the other hand, it was identified that all the studies that were associated with this category were carried out based on a qualitative methodology and the documentary modality.

**Table 2.** Studies related to the first dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Methodology applied</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (Sánchez, 2022)  | Descriptive analytical methodology, in which a documentary review was carried out. | The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the barriers and shortcomings that have plagued Latin American education systems for decades. Students with disabilities were the
most affected due to the restrictions that prevented them from continuing with face-to-face education, since they did not have the necessary resources to adapt to a virtual modality. It was determined that the current conditions of most schools are not adequate to guarantee inclusive education.

| Methodology based on literature review.

González, Peñafiel, Ruth, Manobanda, & Cedeño, 2023 |

The main challenges identified during the pandemic were evidenced by the limited availability of resources, the lack of skills and competencies for the use of technological tools and the scarce tools that facilitate the personalization of teaching for students with disabilities. It was also identified that many parents were not sufficiently prepared to meet the academic needs of their children without the support of specialized teachers.

| Methodology based on literature review.

Villa & Martín, 2020 |

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems were already facing a number of challenges related to barriers that limited access to education for people with disabilities. With the health crisis, these barriers were accentuated, since teachers, students with disabilities and their families were not prepared to face distance education due to lack of resources. The conditions to guarantee the right to inclusive quality education do not currently exist.

| Methodology based on a qualitative approach, aimed at the documentary analysis of reports and other types of publications made by other authors.

Azorín & Martínez, 2023 |

The existing digital divide in different developing countries was one of the main challenges to address inclusive education in times of pandemic. Most educational institutions and families of students with disabilities did not have the resources to access classes from home.

Aguirre Vargas Isabel Cecilia, Addressing inclusive education in the context of the pandemic: a systematic review. pp 247-262
Strategies applied.

Studies aimed at analyzing the strategies applied by managers, teachers, or other actors to guarantee inclusive education in the context of the pandemic were limited. In this case, we found two investigations, one of which was based on the development of a comparative analysis through the collection of documentary information, while the other study combined the application of techniques for the collection of direct information with documentary review. The findings found for this category are summarized below:

Table 3. Studies related to the second dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Methodology applied</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Figueredo &amp; Lozano, 2022)</td>
<td>Methodology based on a comparative analysis based on information obtained through the documentary review.</td>
<td>The challenges that were evident during the pandemic in the framework of inclusive education reflected that most Spanish communities were not prepared to face this scenario. As a response measure, various strategies based on curricular adaptation were implemented to facilitate access to distance education for students with disabilities, adjustments to curricula, implementation of the UDL, and support from teachers and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bonilla &amp; Sánchez, 2022)</td>
<td>Mixed methodology, based on the analysis of the reality of study through the application of surveys and interviews.</td>
<td>Faced with the difficulties of access to specialized resources to attend the inclusive education of students with disabilities during the pandemic, the use of platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom was chosen since they offer different functionalities that could be used to manage interactions between teachers and students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As in the first variable, for this category four article were found whose main objective was based on analyzing the perceptions and experiences of those involved (teachers and parents of students with disabilities), regarding the approach to inclusive education in the context of the health crisis. Of the total references found, one was based on the systematization of information collected from secondary sources, while the remaining three studies combined the application of different techniques for data collection from primary sources. The findings found for this category are summarized below:

**Table 4. Studies related to the third dimension.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Methodology applied</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Olarte, 2022)</td>
<td>Methodology based on the systematization of information from secondary sources.</td>
<td>Teachers have the perception that as a result of the pandemic, the need to adapt pedagogical practices and incorporate the different resources available to manage interaction and communication with students with disabilities was evident, this being a key piece to guarantee inclusion. The socioeconomic conditions of the families of students with disabilities were also decisive, this contributed to many children with disabilities not being able to access classes from their homes, so that to guarantee inclusive education it is also necessary to take into account the conditions and the environment in which the students operate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(González, Moreno, &amp; Mañas, 2022)</td>
<td>Methodology based on a qualitative approach through the application of interviews and focus groups with teachers.</td>
<td>Teachers' perception of the approach to inclusive education during the pandemic highlights the importance of integrating students with disabilities into regular schools, since the segregation that still exists contributes to school exclusion. They also highlight the need to provide adequate resources to meet the needs of this segment of the student population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Díaz, Veliz, Rivera, &amp; Vega, 2022)</td>
<td>Methodology based on an observational design of descriptive scope. The Index for inclusion, applied to a sample of parents of students with</td>
<td>The results showed that the majority of parents who participated in the study have a negative perception regarding the approach to inclusive education in times of pandemic. They said that educational institutions were not sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of students with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The contributions made by different authors allowed us to determine that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the main obstacles to addressing inclusive education were attributed to the lack of resources available to guarantee access to distance classes and the lack of preparation of parents to meet the educational needs of their children. Despite significant efforts by educational institutions and teaching staff, students with disabilities were more affected during the pandemic compared to students without disabilities who had greater facilities to access available resources. It emphasizes the need to focus not only on how it is emphasized that students can adapt to the existing educational environment, but a paradigm break, which implies understanding the need for the educational environment to adapt to the student and also institutional changes and inclusive development of the educational organization itself.

Conclusion

The experience acquired by students and their families, teachers and educational institutions during the pandemic generated an opportunity for changes and a rapid development of the process of using digital technologies in the educational process. As a result, the study of all aspects related to this has become another relevant area of research in the field of inclusive education, since it was possible to identify that there are still several challenges that must be addressed to facilitate access to inclusive education in a distance context. In addition, most of the studies carried out in recent
years emphasize the need for the formation and development of flexible skills of all participants in the educational process, the development of digital tools specially designed to meet their needs in the learning framework, and support for the continuing education of students with disabilities considering the conditions and environment in which they operate.

Referencias bibliográficas

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**Conflicto de intereses**

La autora declara que este trabajo no presenta conflicto de intereses