

# Inclusion and Schooling Process for Haitian Migrant Children in Tapachula, Chiapas

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— Abstract—

The objective of this article is to describe how the inclusion and schooling process of Haitian migrant children is carried out in primary schools in the city of Tapachula, Chiapas, as part of the agreement established between ACNUR and the state government. Of Chiapas in 2020 "all children to school, for the right to education of refugee children" Through the ethnographic method, the discourse and practice in daily school life are compared so that the research findings and reflections disrupt the structural, cultural, social, and economic barriers that migrant children go through in their school inclusion. Finally, the pedagogical challenges to be assumed to improve social conditions regarding the school inclusion of migrant children are exposed.

**Keywords:**

*Education; migration; childhood; Tapachula.*

In recent years, the southern border of Mexico has occupied a central place in the international political agenda due to the "overflow" growth of migrant groups from diverse latitudes: Central Americans, Cubans, Venezuelans, and Haitians, as well as transcontinental (Africans, Indians, Arabs,) settled as refugees since 2016. Several of them remain in this region for months due to migratory procedures, others, in the impossibility of accessing a favorable response, choose to leave the city of Tapachula through the migrant caravans, such as those that occurred on October 22, 2018, and in January 2019, an event that marked a watershed of the migratory exodus, as well as the cultural encounter that came to add more than 5 to 7 thousand people.

With this event, the unusual record of record flow of human mobility was counted by the thousands. This situation generated a series of challenges for local and international institutions of humanitarian assistance to migrants. According to data from the World International Organization (IOM, 2019), of the 300 and 500 migrants who passed through the city of Tapachula in 2019, the migratory flow increased to 1000 people a day, mostly from Honduras, Guatemala, Haiti, and Cuba. Nationalities that made up the third migrant caravan of approximately 13 people.

For 2020 and 2021, the period of greatest spread of COVID-19, the city of Tapachula registered, according to the narrative of the local press, approximately 120 thousand stranded migrants with a greater number of migrant children. Several of them were installed, fortunately, in shelters; others, sleeping outdoors or sheltered in improvised plastic (nylon) or cardboard camps; they settled in public spaces such as parks: Miguel Hidalgo and Bicentenario. The adverse humanitarian crisis complicated not only the migration procedures but also the medical care of international organizations. In this regard, it was possible to see long lines of women, children, entire families, adults, and others in wheelchairs (due to physical wear and tear) to be attended at the Olympic Stadium in Tapachula.

Faced with this harsh context of social upheaval and humanitarian crisis in the "Prison City", as migrants call Tapachula, Chiapas, the cultural encounter in the Soconusco region multiplied in unimaginable numbers, as well as the needs to be met. In 2022, while carrying out fieldwork, the fifth caravan was presented on June 6 of the same year, which was made up of approximately 15 thousand people of which it is estimated "it is made up of children and adolescents with a total of 20%" (*Save the Children, 2022*). While this happens in terms of mobility, those who remain waiting for their safe passage or to organize a new caravan, recreate forms of socialization, habits, and languages that are enriched and diversified in the area. Due to the settlement of migrant groups in outlying districts of the city, cultural encounters become visible in neighborhoods, churches, and schools.

On this last point, in educational matters, the government of the state of Chiapas and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agreed on January 22, 2020, to improve opportunities for access to education through the "School Access Route for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and the UN Refugee Agency" (UNHCR, 2020). With this agreement, it is expected to improve social conditions in terms of school inclusion of migrant children.

Two years after this proposal and the increase in migrant children in school spaces, the central objective of the research is to learn from school ethnography how the process of inclusion and schooling of Haitian migrant children is carried out. The following specific objectives are pursued: a) Identify through school ethnographic work the process of school inclusion that characterizes the experience of Haitian migrant children in Tapachula, Chiapas; b) Describe the participation of school actors: directors, teachers, children, family, and government organizations, around school inclusion; c) Explain the pedagogical strategies employed by teachers concerning the school inclusion of Haitian migrant children. Finally, the barriers and challenges to assume in the daily work of inclusive education in this border city in southern Mexico are presented as reflections.

The article is divided into four sections. The first presents the theoretical conceptualizations of school inclusion and its adaptation in Mexico. In addition to contextual elements of the arrival of Haitian migration to Mexico in 2018 and 2021. The second part consists of the methodological body. The third section describes the analytical concepts of the research results. Finally, the final reflections.

## CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The international context of educational policy in the field of inclusive education is located in the agreements of the "International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education "All Students Count" (UNESCO, 2019), there the progress and challenges of the "Education for All Project that derived from the World Conference on Special Educational Needs, held in Salamanca (Spain) in 1994", (Ainscow, 2019) were evaluated. As a result of these agreements, in 2016, UNESCO prepared the 2030 agenda action plan, which strengthens inclusive education, equity, and the environment. Highlighting the following:

It highlights the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access, participation, learning processes, and outcomes. It also advocates focusing special attention on those who have been traditionally excluded from educational opportunities, such as students from

the poorest households, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, and people with disabilities. (p. 11)

The commitment to inclusive education proposes that educational environments rethink their pedagogical practices, taking into account school diversity and the socio-cultural transformation of the context. According to Booth and Ainscow (2015), educational inclusion is linked to the development of “a common school for all” that encompasses the participation of all:

This is not an aspect of education related to a certain group of students. It has to do with coherence in the improvement or innovation activities that are usually carried out in schools under a variety of initiatives so that they converge in the task of fostering learning and the participation of everyone: students and their families, staff, the management team, and other members of the community. (Booth & Ainscow, 2015, p. 24)

Educational inclusion, according to Ainscow (2019), is a process, and as such, one must learn to live with difference and diversity. The goal is to focus on identifying and removing barriers. The work includes assistance, participation, and moral responsibility of the school community to overcome the dichotomy between integration and inclusion. In this regard, Escribano and Martínez (2013) pointed out that the confrontation between integration and inclusion requires a different way of thinking about educational work, which implies rethinking concepts such as quality, quality of life, participation, equity, tolerance, and diversity, to which are added the elements of inclusion: students, parents, teachers, and school.

On the other hand, as García (2018) pointed out, in Mexico the term educational inclusion arose as a result of changes in international educational policy from 1993 to 1995 when “the National Educational Integration Project (PNIE)” was implemented, which was modified by 2002 when the National Program for Strengthening Special Education and Educational Integration (PNFEEIE) was created. In this process of conceptual redefinitions, Special Educational Needs (SEN) was changed to Barriers to Learning and Participation (BAP).

In 2013, the SEP ordered the integration of different programs that served a diverse population (Indigenous children, migrants, children with disabilities, and children with outstanding abilities and aptitudes, among others) into a new program, the National Program for Inclusion and Educational Equity (PNIEE), which led to the disappearance of the PNFEEIE. (García, 2018, p. 50)

With these changes in educational policy, the PNIEE began to use the term inclusive education in school contexts, adapting to the needs of each institution. Therefore, the term “educational integration” was no longer used and was replaced by the term “inclusive education”. Currently, special education units such as Regular Education Support Service Units (USAER) and special schools such as Multiple Attention Centers (CAM) are the ones that guide teachers in their pedagogical practice.

Although there are many conceptualizations of inclusive education, the challenge lies in practice, in daily school life, and in the way in which the agents of inclusion (teachers) give meaning to this school project. For the Anglo-Saxon world, it is expressed as inclusive education, and for the rest of the Latin American countries as "School for all". Inclusive education, therefore, is not initially about places. "It is, first and foremost, *an attitude* of profound respect for differences and commitment to the task of not making them obstacles but opportunities." (Echeita & Sandoval, 2002, p. 44)

Locally, in the case of Chiapas, the route of School Access for Refugees or Asylum Seekers, proposed by UNHCR and the government of the state of Chiapas, recognized the importance of improving access to education for migrant children. This proposal not only exposed the need to make pedagogical work more flexible but also highlighted the importance of including the participation of migrant children in the school scenario as a contextual need and new pedagogical approaches.

The Ministry of Public Education of the state of Chiapas identified more than 600 applicants for refugee status in schools in the state. The Ministry admitted that one of the challenges is obtaining accurate data on the entry of the asylum-seeking and refugee population in Chiapas. For this reason, they hope that thanks to the presentation of the school access route, the different SEP agencies will be able to coordinate and obtain more reliable statistics. (Pierre in ACNUR, 2020)

#### CONTEXT: REACHING MEXICO'S SOUTHERN BORDER!

The municipality of Tapachula Chiapas, on Mexico's southern border, is a strategic internment point for migrants and refugees. Its geographic location makes it a place of origin, transit, destination, or return of migratory flows. Reaching the southern border becomes that sigh, that breath, that the immigration process grants while the process is resolved and they continue to the United States or to some other northern state of the country to find a better job. The momentary truce is just one of the many places to travel along the long route to the north of the country. In this regard, the delicate testimony presented below is the very evidence of multiple stories that accompany the

difficult journey of migrant children: "Finally, I'm not going to walk anymore!" -said Shaika, a 12-year-old girl, who narrates her migratory journey:

I arrived here 9 months ago. I don't remember the exact date, but I know it's been 9 months. I arrived in Peru in 2017 and spent 4 years there. Well, I was going to be 5 and I left in 2021 to come here (Mexico): me, my grandmother, my brother, my aunts, my uncles. There are nine in my family. We left Peru because of political and economic issues, so we came here.

I went through the jungle to come to Mexico. You find all kinds of animals, it's super dangerous! There's no food and the water is super dirty, sometimes the water carries you away, and there are even demons there! There are people injured, dead, and sometimes they even kill them in front of you with a gun, they rape people in front of you, and if people don't bring money or something of value, they rape the daughter, the mother, and if the father tries to interfere they kill him or any family member who gets in the way. Someone tried to rape me [...] (she lowers her head and starts crying).

I walked for two weeks without water and food. You walk whenever you can, but you can't sit for too long because it's dangerous. You have to cross rivers, but not by walking, it is between the rocks, and if you fall, the water takes you. I could no longer breathe from walking, I asked my mom to stay there, I felt like my heart was going to stop from a scare, I could not breathe at all. When I arrived in Costa Rica I was hospitalized because my breathing was very bad and I had a heart problem.

The passage through Central America was on foot and in buses, when we arrived in Guatemala it was nighttime, and some gentlemen checked us, they lifted our clothes to see what we were carrying, and quickly let us walk and hide because the immigration agents and thieves were coming from all sides. Then we took one of those boats from the Guatemalan side [referring to the rafts] and with that we crossed. (Shaika, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

The multiple life narratives expressed by women of all ages, girls, adolescents, and adults, emphasized the vulnerability they experience as they are exposed to assaults, rape, harassment, as well as crime and persecution by police officers. As Shaika said: "-The road has to go on and leave behind what you can; what you can't try to forget along the way". The abundant jungle that extends between the Colombia-Panama border, better known as the Darien Gap, is also an area of increased insecurity for them. At this intersection, three more adolescents claimed to have been raped.

According to Coulange (2018), contextualizing the Haitian migratory exodus responds to a process of structural crisis that is situated in the mid-twentieth century. In this period, the migration of Haitians was specifically to Caribbean countries: the Dominican Republic and Cuba, where the

economic investment by the United States went to the sugar mills that attracted cheap labor. In the case of South America, Montoya and Sandoval (2018), Coulange (2016, 2018), and Vargas (2021) agree that the increase in this migration was due to the 2010 earthquake, as well as the cholera epidemic that broke out in the same year and Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Thus, the combination of natural catastrophes and epidemics further damaged the already crumbling social fabric of the Haitian people. In the face of such a humanitarian crisis "the U.S. government relaxed its immigration policy towards Haitians, granting *Temporary Protected Status*" (Coulange & Castillo, 2020, p. 5) countries like Chile, Brazil, and Mexico did the same.

The 2014 World Cup celebrations and the 2016 Olympics in Brazil increased the labor supply and labor requirements for the construction of stadiums, buildings, factories, and stores. This situation expanded the work opportunities for Haitians. Several of them established since 2010 were able to maintain a stable life for a certain period. However, at the end of the international events, the employment situation changed radically. Unemployment began to fracture tempers, as well as the migrants' economy. In this regard, Coulange (2020) noted:

Haitians settled in this country found themselves in a socio-labor context marked by the disappearance of thousands of jobs and recurrent socio-political turbulence. Faced with this situation, they began to look for new migratory alternatives in the region - redirecting mainly to Chile - and outside of it. (p. 5)

Regarding the Haitian migratory exodus in the case of Mexico, Vargas (2021) identified 4 processes that make up the flow of this migration, specifically to the border city of Tijuana:

- a) The 2016 exodus, mostly Haitians from South American countries
- b) That of 2018 and 2019, through the migratory phenomenon "ant group"
- c) The worsening of the social situation and the demonstrations and migrant caravans
- d) The COVID -19 pandemic. (p. 31)

In this vein, the work of Stephanie Brewer, Lesly Tejada, and Maureen Meyer (2022) for the Washington Office on Latin America WOLA,<sup>1</sup> States:

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1 WOLA is a leading research and advocacy organization promoting human rights in the Americas. Our vision is to achieve a continent in which public policies protect human rights and recognize human dignity, and where justice prevails over violence.



In 2021, Mexico received a record of 130.627 asylum applications, more than 100 times the number received just eight years ago, in 2013. The top three nationalities seeking asylum in Mexico in 2021 were people from Haiti, Honduras, and Cuba. The number of Haitian applicants increased the most from 2020 to 2021, from 5.917 to 51.337. (p. 7)

Perhaps, a curious and interesting fact to add that gives another reading of the "boom" of the Haitian presence in southern Mexico, is the one pointed out by Vargas (2022), who identified that many of the Haitians entering the country through Tapachula, the majority self-assigned as Congolese, suppose that the Haitians proceeded in this way to expedite their passage through Mexico heading north, in such a way that "the increase in Haitians in that border city went from 12 registered in January 2016 to 2,048 in August 2016" (Vargas, 2022, p. 33).

According to the various conversations that took place in the field between Haitian men and women aged 30 and over, they pointed out that the migratory route has two courses: from Haiti to Brazil, then Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Central America, Mexico (Tapachula southern border and Tijuana northern border), or from Haiti to Chile, then Chile to Peru, Peru-Ecuador-Colombia-Panama-Costa Rica-Nicaragua-Honduras-Guatemala-Mexico, a journey of approximately 10 countries, as can be seen in Figure 1.

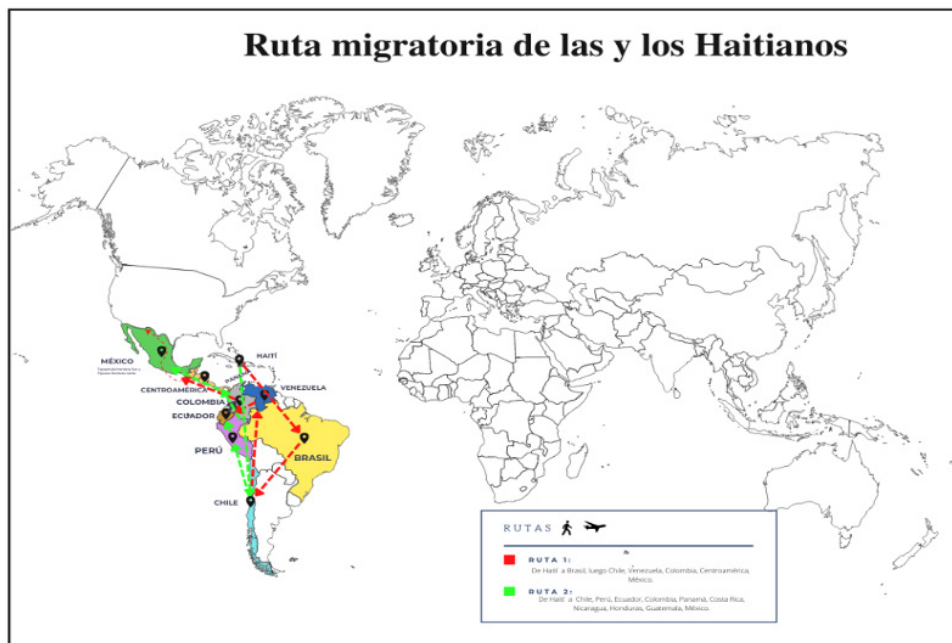


Figure 1. Migration path map. Source: Own elaboration

After the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in Haiti on July 7, 2021, things became even more complicated. This allowed criminal groups to take over the country, leaving out any possibility of remaining and closing for many the option of returning. In this regard, Icenice, a 37-year-old Haitian woman, said:

I left Haiti at the age of 19 before the earthquake. Imagine now, killing our president! Even us. What are we going to do? We have to look for a future. For now, I'm calm here. (Icenice, personal communication, June 18, 2022)

By contextualizing the Haitian migratory exodus, the place of destination becomes relevant. In this logic, Soconusco, specifically the border city of Tapachula, has a historical knowledge of the cultural diversity, past and present, of immigrants from Europe, Asia, and North America, such as Germans, English, French, Italians, Canadians, Americans, Japanese, and Chinese, who entered the country at the end of the 19th century. Some cultural traits remain in force locally, as is the case of the German, Chinese, and Japanese ancestors.

Regarding the Central American migration<sup>2</sup> that defines the cultural mosaic of this region by historical relations before and after the border delimitations (1824), it can be said that its persistent economic and cultural connection represents a scenario of multiple cultural, social, and economic relations. In this encounter of cultural diversity, the 'multinational' identity of Soconusco resignifies itself in the social space and the urban landscape, where recognition and denial of 'some' identities against 'others' by phenotypic, linguistic, cultural, and economic criteria, wrapped in discourses and stereotypes, as happens with Haitians.

## METHODOLOGY

From the simultaneous tensions generated by the settlement of new cultures in the city of Tapachula and nearby towns, racist and xenophobic speeches were evidenced in the local press representing the vox populi. Part of this sociocultural impact manifested itself in a short time, especially in primary schools, which saw a strong presence in Haitian childhood. This situation

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2 See Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint (2015), *en la frontera sur de México: orígenes y desarrollo de la migración centroamericana*.

Martha Luz Rojas – Wiesner (2018), *remontar fronteras para trabajar en el sur de México: el caso de adolescentes de Guatemala en Tapachula*. Both studies address the processes of change of migration from a long-term socio-historical period and its complexities that are experienced in the daily life of migrant youth.

aroused my interest in approaching, a study of the school ethnography of Mercado (1997), on classroom spaces, and pedagogical contexts.

The methodology of this research is of qualitative approach and interpretative method, it is located within the cultural or interpretative anthropology of Geertz (1973). As it is an investigation that starts from the educational inclusion in the school context of the experiences of Haitian migrant children and youth in the city of Tapachula Chiapas, it was approached from the perspective of educational<sup>3</sup> Anthropology or school ethnography. According to Wolcott (1999):

Most so-called school ethnography is really a quick description (not to be confused with “dense description”), the purpose of which is to reveal weaknesses, point out needs, or pave the way for change and reform. At best, this is a utilitarian, pragmatic, *ad hoc* ethnography (p. 142).

In the ethnographic exploration that was used in the fieldwork, as Rockwell (2018) pointed out, it was considered important to attend school as a result of a permanent social construction where "life in schools responds to an active, creative process, linked to the changing character of the cultural order" (p. 36). Thus, the approach was to the school culture, the space, and the academic community, mediated by the interpretation of their relationships and conceptions of educational work.

In this sense, the role of the educational ethnographer was assumed in the multiplicity of situations and human relationships of daily school life in the understanding that:

One of the challenges of the educational ethnographer is to understand, from within and in specific situations, the social representations - official and unofficial, written or oral, informed or founded on public opinion - that make up the cultural fabric of schooled education. (Bertely, 2000, p. 34)

Regarding field research, the analysis was based on a school ethnography study (participant observation, open interviews, case follow-up), between April and June in open interviews with managers, teachers, parents, Haitian children, and representatives of international organizations. A total of 40 people were interviewed: 10 Haitian children in an age range of 6 to 12 years, including 6 girls and 4 boys; 4 mothers; 2 fathers; 15 teachers; 5 managers; 2 USAER teachers; and 2 USAER interns.

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3 George Spindler, together with his wife Louise, founded at Stanford University the studies in the Anthropology of Education (1982).

The research work was carried out in basic education schools at the primary level that met the selection criteria: located on the outskirts of the city, in shelters for migrants and asylum seekers, in migratory instances, as well as in areas where the settlement of the migrant population has been registered.

The study focused on learning about daily school life from educational experiences, as suggested by Rockwell (2018) and Mercado (1997). This proximity made it possible to understand the school process as "a complex plot in which historical traditions, regional variations, political, administrative, and bureaucratic decisions interact" (Mercado, 1997, p. 16), all these situations act as a set of institutionalized relationships and practices, which connected in a school political system, help to understand how teaching and educational inclusion is organized.

In this sense, understanding the daily reality of the educational experience lived by migrant children involved approaching the knowledge, values, and ways of assuming social relationships and integrating. In this way, distinguishing the internal order of the school in its formal (official) curriculum, beyond the school rules, allowed observing from its operation the way of doing "school inclusion practice", or at least, what is understood about it (hidden curriculum). Therefore, below is an overview of the structural (institutional) didactic and pedagogical barriers, which were identified by what the school inclusion of migrant children has gone through in daily school life and the socio-educational context in the Tapachulteco scenario.

*Institutional barrier. School inclusion in Tapachula between discourses and practices*

On the field trip I took in March as part of the research diagnosis, I visited 10 elementary schools. According to the delimitation of the object of study, I focused on 2 institutions, the Venustiano Carranza School and the Primero de Mayo Primary School, located in the center and periphery of the city. The criterion for delimiting the object of the research was based on the greater number of Haitian children in school spaces. During those visits, I engaged in open conversations with managers. In them, I identified how one of the main barriers that Haitian families face in the process of registering their children is the institutional one. It was argued that this admission generates problems in the increases or decreases in enrollment:

They are asked to present the age of the child and their academic level, if they do not know it, they take a grade evaluation according to their age. As they are a floating population, sometimes children come, register, stay a month or sometimes less than a month, and leave, I have that space occupied because a child cannot be discharged if a parent does not request it. The father of the family leaves and says goodbye! (Executive, personal communication, April 27, 2022)

As for the problem that enrollment and discharges imply for managers, this situation is handled as an administrative burden. According to them, this generates more work for them and they consider it a lost space for the national child. An interesting fact of the observation was to identify that in front of the school is the neighborhood "La Flora" (set of departments), where 60% of the families that inhabit it are Haitians. Despite that, no Haitian girls or boys are registered in this school year.

They are not denied the right to education, but they need to meet the registration requirements, because then the problem is for me. After all, the documentation does not match, and of course, if there is a place, they are welcome. (Executive, personal communication, April 28, 2022)

The institutional rejection as a structural barrier faced by Haitian parents and children is evidence of the intolerance of cultural diversity present in Tapachula. Racism and xenophobia in the school context are rooted in the institutional monoculturalism that managers and teachers develop according to their unique ways of understanding school culture and identities, which is very accentuated in the locality. In such a way, the stereotypes on which the judgment of what is acceptable is based, permeate sectarian, racist, exclusive, and xenophobic criteria, by an institutional racism that is understood as a discriminatory service "through involuntary prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotypes, which disadvantages people belonging to ethnic minorities" (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 47).

In addition to the limitation of school registration that occurs in some institutions, if the girl or boy is accepted, she is assigned to the evening shift. Of the 10 schools observed, only 2 accepted Haitian children in both shifts. They argue that the morning shift is occupied faster, therefore, the remaining spaces are for the afternoon shift. The allocation, for the most part, is to children from countries such as Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti, along with those of special attention.

Here we have always been inclusive, I do not know if because it is an afternoon shift, we accept all students, and we do not put obstacles. We always accept all migrants. (Executive, personal communication, June 6, 2022)

On the other hand, it is necessary to point out the existence of schools that admit Haitian children and make the requirements and study shifts more flexible. In conversations with managers, I was able to corroborate that the treatment of parents and children in general consists of guiding, understanding, and helping. As an example, in May 2022 the fifth caravan of the year was organized, and many Haitian parents presented themselves to the school to

formally dismiss their daughter or son. Teachers and managers, on the other hand, guided the dismissal process:

I remove them from SAECH [Educational Administration System of Chiapas], I give them sheets like these [grades, their dismissal], say thank you! and they leave. With that document, they are unenrolled wherever they go, wherever they go. So, they go to a school and they are easily enrolled because, with the student number they can already access the educational system of another state, and the data of the child and the father appear (Director, personal communication, April 28, 2022)

Schools that consider the right of children and their access to school in the morning shift, ask as the only identity document the passport to register, as well as the grade location, so that, through a diagnostic evaluation, they enroll the child:

We know that they do not even bring a birth certificate, let alone an educational document from home. So, only the official document is the passport that we ask them for. We have never discriminated against children, here everyone integrates into everything: in physical education, working in teams, working in pairs, and participating in the classroom; here we have Haitian children from first to sixth grade. (Executive, personal communication, April 27, 2022)

The complex educational reality of the Chiapas context in southern Mexico confronts the discourse of educational inclusion with practice. In this process, there is still a lack of awareness of children's rights to free access to education and of a protocol that allows for inclusive education. Although most managers "assume" to be inclusive, few favor administrative procedures. In my opinion, these limitations of an institutional political nature clearly fit with one of the 4 major dimensions of the barriers that Haitian children cross: structural, cultural, social, and economic. I highlight the structural one as part of the institutional requirements.

I must point out that to do the interviews and have access to the school space, 2 managers of the 10 interviewees made a series of administrative excuses for the observations such as presenting an institutional letter, consulting with their teachers, making known the objective of the work and then waiting for their permission. Finally, they agreed to the observations and talks, except for a principal who always said she was busy with administrative matters due to the end of the year.

It is then recognized that the institutional barrier is the first element that hinders access to education from the moment certain administrative limitations are put in place, as well as access to a certain shift or not.

According to Booth and Ainscow (2011), this situation is part of institutional discrimination that revolves around perceptions of cultures, so many times the answers given are negative. These identified points are:

- a) Lack of access, no space.
- b) Identification documents, often from an academic institution.
- c) If accepted, the evening shift is granted.
- d) They are integrated, not included.



*Figure 2. Cultural diversity in the classroom*



Figure 3. Haitian children, another school reality

### *Language barrier. The myth in the daily school life of Haitian children*

According to the explanations that teachers made to the group about the presence of Haitian children in school spaces, they pointed out that, in the period from September 2021 to February 2022, the basic education schools in Tapachula, Chiapas registered significant numbers of migrant children, several had a total of 26, 18, and 15 girls and boys enrolled. From March to June 2022, school dropouts increased due to migrant caravans. Many families enlisted to reach cities like Monterrey and Tijuana. From then on, the population of Haitian children in schools was 3 to 5 Haitian children.

Regarding the presence of Haitian children in the school context, the teaching staff spoke about the uncertainty that the admission presented for them:

When they told me that they would give me three Haitian children, I was like "-Hey!, and now, what do I do?". I imagined that they did not speak Spanish, and my surprise was that one did speak Spanish and the other two did nothing, I did not understand them, only with signs, I felt like a deaf mute, and when the child began to read, the mother thanked me. I thought they weren't going to learn anything, so I said, "—no, let's see what I can do." I remember that on one occasion I started writing vowels and consonants and joining words, I saw



that they liked that activity. The next day, he asked me to put words together and he wanted to do that activity every day because he was learning (Teacher, personal communication, May 6, 2022)

With the arrival of Haitian children, many myths that accompanied their presence were founded on a social imaginary in the Tapachula society by the local yellow press. At first, it was thought that they would be carriers of disease and cultural contamination. At school, the main barrier that was considered was linguistics, as a consequence, there would be a misunderstanding of school contents. This myth, as we shall see, faded in practice:

At first, I felt uncertain, because I said: "—how am I going to work with this child if he is not going to understand me or I am not going to understand him? It comes with another language, it's going to be a little bit difficult. I was surprised that the child speaks Spanish and we put the educational situation into practice, perhaps with some difficulties, because they bring another learning style (Teacher, personal communication, May 6, 2022)

Although Haitian children were considered non-Spanish speakers, it should be noted that most of them come from South American countries (Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Dominican Republic). From the large migratory flows that have occurred for years in Haiti, many couples and pregnant women come to have their children in these countries. That is, most are Spanish speakers. Thus, the children are Chilean, Peruvian, and Brazilian, while the parents are Haitian. In such a way, that schools are composed of Chilean-Haitian, Peruvian-Haitian, and Brazilian-Haitian children, we then speak of multinational families (Fernández, 2022). Some more come from Brazil, and although they speak Portuguese they understand Spanish, a smaller population comes from Haiti.

Regarding pedagogical practice, the teaching staff, for the most part, resorts to a pedagogy by association (Bandura) to strengthen meaningful learning and thus encourage communication in the classroom. They consider that focusing on the socialization of children is the priority. They argue that children need to strengthen the affective part after going through long migratory processes, in addition to the fact that due to the classroom contextual need, they cannot be taught other content without first taking into consideration school needs.

I see that for migrant children, school serves them beyond learning topics, it is more in coexistence, in the socio-cultural question. They come to socialize with the children at our school. We do not advance in topics, I see general topics, and they sometimes understand me and sometimes they don't, because in

communication we do not call things the same way, it is very difficult to refer to something. (Teacher, personal communication, April 17, 2022)

Despite this limitation that responds to cultural regionalisms, Haitian children show an enormous commitment to school activities. They bring the school activities done, they wear the school uniform, and bring supplies and breakfast. The teaching staff points out as necessary to strengthen the sociocultural learning (Lev Vygotsky) of children as a priority, so recreational activities such as physical education, art, and culture, allow them to develop those skills.

I was surprised Jean because he spoke Spanish very well! He had good fluency, he was trying to tell me the indication or something. It was a pretty pleasant experience working with them, they were very smart guys, especially in sports, the teacher told me: "They are very skilled! How they run!" They are very good runners and fast workers, they are very smart!, I was fortunate to meet very smart children (Teacher, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

Although in theory, the presence of Haitian children represented a linguistic challenge for the teaching staff, in school life, this apparent barrier was overcome in pedagogical practice. The significant number of Spanish-speaking children, who came from Chile and Peru, favored the internal dynamics of the classroom with companionship. Between them, they translated the activities and instructions into *Creole* and then presented them in Spanish. In this sense, the linguistic exchange was recurrent.

The same was true for Haitian parents who came to the school for the first time to enroll their children. The managers used one of their Haitian students as an interpreter.

Fortunately, like these children, others speak Spanish well. We had a girl here who spoke four languages and served as a translator for both the other children and their parents (Director, personal communication, June 6, 2022).

It is interesting to identify that this role of the interpreter on the part of Haitian children was not only characteristic of school spaces but also served the parents in their migratory procedures at the National Migration Institute, as well as at COMAR and UNHCR since many of them speak only Creole, some Portuguese and very little Spanish, their children support them in their migratory processes as translators.

Regarding the academic performance of the Haitian children, the recognition of their language skills and competencies by teachers and managers was positive. It is noteworthy that the good results in their school activities were specifically attributed to the children coming from Chile.

On the other hand, at the crossroads of situations and pedagogical perspectives that led to an understanding of daily school life, several teachers pointed out that they have no training in the inclusive education approach. What little they know comes from the support that international organizations such as *Save the Children* and UNHCR provides them with school furniture and training for parents.

In the schools, the teachers who make up the various Regular Education Support Service Units (USAER) train teachers in the new pedagogical approaches. Regarding the process of building the foundations for educational inclusion, they pointed out that the first barrier they encounter is their peers:

We, as USAER, have had the first challenge with the teaching staff. It's been several years in our USAER number 28. Despite this, there are still barriers with the teaching staff, we are in our infancy when it comes to educational integration. Yes, there are the children, but they just enroll them, even though this issue has been going on for years, the teaching staff is not 100% involved, at first glance we have this problem, but it is the lack of knowledge and awareness of the staff involved. (USAER teacher, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

The theoretical ignorance is visible in practice since many of the activities are reduced to a simulated pedagogy, pretending to teach and fulfill the institutional objectives by resorting to entertainment:

In the classroom, the teacher only asks to borrow something to entertain the child. They are not tailoring the activities to him. That is not inclusion, but entertainment (USAER teacher, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

On the other hand, there is resistance to change; it is assumed that educational inclusion is the exclusive responsibility of USAER teachers so this thinking obstructs in practice the implementation of new strategies, which is why teachers perceive it as an overload of activities.

I had to deal with schools that did not accept me because I was an inclusive education teacher, to give practice, because they felt that it was more work for a child to have a disability or speak another language. They have the idea that the student is USAER's responsibility, e.g., "he is not my student, he is USAER's"; there is a label. That inclusion is nothing more than enrolling them in school, but they do not work with him; it is integration. There is no school content to learn, just the basic words. (Bachelor's Degree in Educational Inclusion student, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

Indeed, the pedagogical gap that exists between educational policy discourse and teaching practice is very distant in terms of educational inclusion. This ignorance of the real to the practical is installed in whether the teacher conceives the pedagogical task and cultural diversity. In this sense, it is assumed that teaching knowledge is another of the barriers that must be faced in daily school life on the southern border of Mexico, where a traditional pedagogy with serious theoretical and didactic gaps stands out.

*Pedagogical barriers: teachers' knowledge and inclusive schools*

Even though the daily life of basic education in Tapachula takes place in a diverse classroom with children from Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and Nicaragua as regular children, this situation has not implied the development of an inclusive pedagogy or inclusive classroom projects (Ainscow, 2001).

The multiple conversations that took place with the teaching staff focused on learning about the strengths and weaknesses including the self-reflection of teaching knowledge and pedagogical work, better known as SWOT.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, they pointed out that despite the challenge they faced in dealing with the school reality of migrant children, much of their uncertainty stemmed from a lack of teacher training on the part of the SEP.

The government has not prepared us for 10 years; no courses, no training of any kind. They don't give diplomas, and it's like a broken telephone: "Go take it", and if someone sends it to me, they send it to me until it reaches the schools. The magisterium is not prepared, we face it as best we can. (Teacher, personal communication, April 17, 2022)

The lack of teacher training in terms of courses, methodologies, pedagogical approaches, and didactics by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) contributes to the increase in the backwardness of the country's schools. According to INEGI data in 2019, it was found at the national level that "30 million people in an age range of 15 years or more do not reach the basic educational level" (INEGI, 2019). Currently, this situation drastically increased the out-of-school population three times over, further aggravating the education crisis and the national project (CONEVAL, 2020).

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4 These acronyms derive from the term SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats); a business methodology applied to understand the real situation of a company, institution, or project, based on recognizing the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, (SWOT), also applied to the school context.

The reinstatement of teachers in schools as part of the hybrid educational model in the post-pandemic period established a working schedule of Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. for the morning shift and from 2 to 5 p.m. for the evening shift. Fridays were set aside exclusively for teachers' meetings. Even so, labor absences were visible, so the situation is still adverse for children's education, which takes place in an unequal environment, coupled with internal union struggles that hinder any educational proposal that does not fit with their interests and political goals.

Thus, much of the teaching knowledge is based on traditional pedagogy, which makes the work with diversity distant, with routine activities. Few were the teachers who resorted to the approach of a constructivist or critical pedagogy that adheres to the guidelines of the humanistic school as part of the current educational approach (SEP, 2017). Although teachers are making an effort to cope with the situation, they assume that the primary challenge of classroom needs is based on self-questioning and the commitment to make collaborative learning effective, in addition to including ICT and new pedagogies that incorporate a focus on gender, equity, inclusive language, and inclusive education.

By referring to teaching knowledge as a cultural and institutional barrier, it implies a social knowledge that is collectively constructed and shared with teachers and students in the same social space: the school. This space, being traversed by methods, techniques, programs, and rules, that is, the *curriculum*, implies as a critical and autonomous exercise the reflection of pedagogical practice. In this regard, according to Tardif (2014), that same social space of the school, in its encounters, negotiations, and sharing of experiences, teaching knowledge makes sense among what is known and unknown, as well as what has to be learned:

What a teacher knows also depends on what he does not know, on what he is not supposed to know, on what others know in his place and on his behalf, on the knowledge that others oppose or attribute to him [...] This means that, in the trades and professions, there is no knowledge without social recognition (p. 12).

In such a way that this knowledge is exposed to changes and readjustments due to its very nature as a social construction. The school, therefore, also adds to this totality, since it is the underlying academic culture, a culture of the students within the school social community, in addition to the fact that the student's culture is the reflection of an immediate local culture closely linked to the context.

In the meetings that we have as a school board, it has been commented that if we are going to be receiving foreign children, we should be trained or look for

a person to talk to us about the languages, it is very broad what we have to look for in tools to be able to face this migratory phenomenon. We are totally overwhelmed by the situation. (Teacher, personal communication, May 6, 2022)

According to Gimeno Sacristán (2008), the school should promote socialization mechanisms that meet academic needs, allowing in turn “to foster the plurality of ways of living, thinking, feeling, stimulating pluralism, and cultivating the originality of individual differences as the most genuine expression of the richness of the human community and social tolerance” (p. 30). This plural knowledge of diversity is also the knowledge of social deconstruction that must be used to redefine teaching practice as it is presented:

We should be better prepared. For me, it is a challenge to have a child from any other country, because you learn from them and also because you cannot close the door to children, since public education is for everyone. We must be better prepared to have better communication with those who come since they arrive from the conflict, and if we close the doors to them, they will practically see that our country would be the same. That's why we open our doors to them, even though there are schools that close their doors to these children. (Teacher, personal communication, May 6, 2022)

Inclusion in this environment is a process that attends to diversity in ways of learning and living with it; to a certain extent, as Giroux (1990) pointed out, “working in classrooms implies learning to live in a multitude” (p. 75), so that the person working in the classroom has a moral commitment to assist, participate, and reflect with children; otherwise, his or her teaching knowledge is based on traditional pedagogical models in a complex and changing reality such as that of southern Mexico. In this way, educational inclusion translates into a false interpretation of educational policy mediated by theoretical ignorance in practice.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Based on the above analysis, I will highlight some conclusions. It is evident that the process of educational inclusion in the southern border of Mexico, specifically in Tapachula, Chiapas, presents serious pedagogical challenges that are viewed from three sides: a) Political (contradictory regulations); b) Cultural (conceptual and attitudinal); and c) Didactic (teaching-learning). These dimensions include the structural, cultural, and social barriers faced by Haitian children, in addition to the economic barriers affecting their parents.

Although it is true that the proposal of UNHCR and the Chiapas state government, through the School Access Route for Refugees and Asylum

Seekers, has as its central objective to serve the population in mobility, the pedagogical needs must be addressed immediately, such as teacher training.

The role played by the teacher within the educational universe is essential, not only because he/she is the mediator of educational policies and the context, but also because he/she is how the curriculum makes sense in practice. This is not an argument that points to the teacher as the one directly responsible for school inclusion, but it is an agent that favors or hinders the educational proposal that inevitably makes it a support or a barrier. Teachers as social actors make up the educational universe from the pedagogical operationalization, therefore, to be sensitive to the social reality presented to them, is to put in contact the theory of school inclusion with educational practice. This political and educational commitment implies a search for solutions in the school context, by creating a pedagogical environment that responds to classroom needs, beyond a simulated pedagogy, i.e., promoting contextualized or adapted education (Wang, 2001). In this sense, the improvement of the school environment is the primary challenge of the entire educational skeleton.

The implementation of an inclusive education proposal requires other ways of thinking about pedagogy; it is necessary to redefine teaching knowledge by identifying needs, active planning, contextualized methods and strategies, curriculum flexibility, collaborative approach, and creation of school communities, as well as strengthening teacher training courses and developing a critical pedagogy within the emerging pedagogies that overcomes traditional practices, which are so deeply rooted.

In short, although the road to educational inclusion is a rough one, many of the needs identified in the demystified idea of assuming educational inclusion remain at the level of social integration; therefore, the challenge lies in assuming multiculturalism not only in the city but also in the classroom, which will provide guidelines for thinking about emerging intercultural projects and overcoming institutional monoculturalism. The proposal is underway, but multiple initiatives from the school community are needed to make it possible.

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