

Project title	Venezuelan Migrant Students in Public Schools in Medellín. An Anthropological Analysis	
Project number	23w 0006 01	
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Abstract	<p>This collaborative research project between PHBern and Antioquia University in Colombia (UdeA) will provide an innovative analysis of educational inclusion in international migration contexts. Starting from the UN SDGs 10 & 4 <i>Reducing Inequalities</i> and <i>Equitable Quality Education for all</i>, the project explores how an inclusive public education for all is sought to be reached in Colombia's new international migration context. Historically an emigration country with a high number of internally displaced people, Colombia has only recently received 3 million Venezuelan migrants in a short time. There is currently no ethnographic in-depth study on the impact of this migration on schools in Colombia. The public school, <i>Héctor Abad Gómez</i> in a deprived inner-city district in Medellín is selected as case in point for an anthropological analysis of whether and how the institutional policies and pedagogical practices have been transformed to include large numbers of Venezuelan migrant students in the framework of the school's inclusive-education model and its complicated social context.</p> <p>Methodologically the project is situated within the interpretative paradigm and combines ethnographic methods such as participant observation in classrooms and the school building, narrative interviews with members of the school's educational community and analysis of institutional and policy documents.</p> <p>The pilot study will be implemented during the Colombian school year 2023. Intensive fieldwork will be developed in an ongoing circular research process, initiated by the Colombian team, and then joined by the Swiss team. Preliminary findings will be discussed regularly in workshops with practitioners and in public events in Colombia and Switzerland. Networks between teachers who work in public schools with international migrant students in both countries will be established. Final results will be adopted in initial and permanent teacher education at both cooperating universities.</p>	
Key words	migration, education, orders of difference, Ethnography, Colombia	
Funding	Leading House for research cooperations with the Latin American Region, Institute of Management, University of St Gallen, link https://latinamerica.unisg.ch/en/leading-house/	

Duration 01 of February 2023 to 30 of June 2025

Final Report

This pilot project aimed at leveraging the interdisciplinary and transnational perspective of the Swiss-Colombian research team, employing an approach that entailed intertwining perspectives in joint knowledge production during the research process.

Methodological results

The project proposal was co-constructed by the Swiss-Colombian team in 2022 online and *in situ*.¹ The research was conducted collaboratively: the Colombian team (the PI and three researchers) conducted fieldwork between April and June 2023 and then joined forces with the Swiss team (the PI and three researchers) who continued the fieldwork in July and August 2023.

The data generated during the five months of fieldwork include 48 observation protocols (participant observation was developed in both facilities of the school, in classrooms of 8 programmes), as well as 36 interview transcripts (with teachers (17), school authorities (5), collaborating professionals (3), administrative staff (5), selected students (4) and parents (2)). During the fieldwork, Swiss-Colombian team meetings were organised regularly to collaboratively code and analyse observation protocols and interview transcripts and theoretically sample further observation sites and interview partners at the school's two locations (15 meetings in total, either online or *in situ*). Moreover, policy documents and selected literature were discussed at these meetings. The meetings built a transnational space for reflection and analysis and resulted in several co-authored articles and conference proceedings.

The circular research process also included *workshops* to discuss preliminary findings with practitioners. These workshops contributed significantly to the preparation of the implementation of the follow-up project. Further research questions emerged from the workshops which were then examined in both Colombia and Switzerland.

Empirical results

Public policies

The findings regarding public policies in Colombia highlight the diverse legal principles that the Colombian State has rapidly established in response to the reception of international migrant populations, especially from Venezuela. The analysis of circulars, guidelines and decrees issued by the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with key judgements of Colombia's Constitutional Court, provides compelling evidence that the Colombian state is bound by the principle of non-discrimination with regard to the rights of migrant populations. Consequently, authorities cannot deny migrant children access to the education system on the basis of their origin. The obligation to guarantee access and protection for migrant students has prompted the Colombian government to relax the registration requirements for migrants/refugees from Venezuela, with the aim to ensuring their fundamental right to education.

¹ A follow-up project was co-constructed immediately after the approval of the pilot project and was approved by Movetia (Swiss National Agency for Mobility in Education) in 2023. Its goal was to extend the research of the pilot project conducted in Colombia also to the Swiss context. The follow-up project was conceptualized as formative research and was conducted by researchers and student teachers of both cooperating universities together with in-service teachers in both contexts. It was carried out in 2024 building on the findings of the pilot project.

From this perspective, two principles – human rights and inclusion – were identified as fundamental aspects of educational policies in the new context of international migration in Colombia. Inclusive education is defined by the National Ministry of Education in a broad way and encompasses two key elements: (i) acknowledging the diversity of the students, and promoting their development, learning and participation; and (ii) confronting the multiple forms and causes of exclusion in the education system.

In light of the aforementioned policy responses, Colombia is often considered as having set new standards for securing the right to education of migrant/refugee students in the Global South.

However, our analysis of the jurisprudence of the Colombian Constitutional Court revealed that these responses have significantly evolved from a series of legal actions lodged by migrant families before the Court and sentences that addressed the infringement of the right to education of Venezuelan migrant students.² With these sentences, the jurisprudence centres not solely on denied access to education but also on discriminatory institutional policies and pedagogical practices in schools. In the Héctor Abad Gómez public school the following situation was found.

Institutional policies

Héctor Abad Gómez School offers all grades as well as day and evening classes and a variety of flexible programmes, including Saturday and Sunday classes and bilingual classes for indigenous students (Emberá). As outlined in its Institutional Educational Project (PEI) the administrative and pedagogical practices of this school are framed within two principles: (i) an explicit human and civil rights approach; and (ii) a model of difference-sensitivity. The latter is based on the acknowledgment that difference is an inherent aspect of the human experience. Consequently, the institution does not merely claim to eradicate the barriers to access to education, it also commits with developing diverse academic programmes that seek to meet students' particular social circumstances and personal requirements.

Pedagogical practices

At Héctor Abad Gómez school, teaching staff primarily work with students who are at heightened risk of being excluded from the education system, because many belong to social groups who are collectively discriminated in society. It is thus imperative in the school that pedagogical practices are adapted by teachers to address collective discrimination and social vulnerability. In order to achieve this objective, the school has adopted flexible educational programmes (FEP), which acknowledge the diversity of the students, in terms of ethnic and national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, chronic disease, involvement in criminal proceedings etc., and address students' needs related to these differences. This approach entails the relaxation of academic requirements with a view to averting the attrition of the most vulnerable students. Observations at the school have demonstrated that this is achieved through repeated expressions of acknowledgement and appreciation towards students and their differences, recognition of academic progress, however minor, frequent informal conversations outside the classroom and curricular adaptations. The observed practices have established an affirmative relationship between teachers and students beyond academic ambition.

² Following the constitutional reform in Colombia in 1991, legal instruments such as the *Acción de tutela* were issued, a relatively straightforward legal recourse for individuals who claim that their constitutional rights – e.g. the right to education – have been violated by public entities.

Héctor Abad Gómez School thus exhibits characteristics of a "compensatory school." Teachers at this institution seek to establish spaces within the school that facilitate experiences for their students aimed at counteracting their experiences of marginalization, discrimination and violence. They seek to guarantee that the school is a "safe space" for all students.

However, the institution exhibits controversial conceptions of what an "inclusive school" is. Tensions have been observed between two standpoints: one that asserts that the right to education of vulnerable students, including indigenous and migrant students, is best guaranteed by enrolling them in the school and providing a secure environment, even if this can only be reached by compromising academic standards. The other standpoint is that the enrollment in the school is only one step that guarantees the right to education, and that it is imperative that teachers and students undertake comprehensive efforts to achieve a quality education for all, even if this would result in the exclusion of students who do not meet the academic requirements.

The described controversy involved navigating additional issues with regard to the right to education: teacher professionalism; teachers' employment conditions; how schools as institutions still geared towards long-term settlement, respond to the fact that their student body is increasingly a floating population; or the dynamics provoked in the school by migrant families who place greater value on their children's education than the local population. Another important issue is that geopolitics significantly influence local schools such as Héctor Abad Gómez School, which is confronted with fluctuating numbers of migrant/refugee students depending on geopolitical moves regarding migration policy. This situation has also affected teachers' employment conditions, as the total number of students may increase or decrease significantly.

Conclusions

The examination of the Colombian government's rapid legal response to the substantial arrival of international migrants within a short period, together with an analysis of the Héctor Abad Gómez School's measures to accommodate a large number of migrant students, yields two principal conclusions: (1) even in politically and socially complex contexts it is possible to establish a legal framework that safeguards the fundamental civil rights of migrant populations if there is the political will to do so; (2) the way in which various actors—politicians, professionals, migrant families, students, teachers, school authorities, and others—interpret and deploy this legal framework to secure the right to education and foster an inclusive school is shaped by contested and often contradictory negotiations, particularly when navigating diversity and divergent legal classifications of the students. The "inclusive school" cannot be understood as a normative standard to be imposed globally.

Conducting ethnographic research in the school required a constant reflection both about the influence of the researcher on the groups being studied, and about the influence of the school as bureaucratic institution on the generated data, also because of the fact, that one Colombian researcher was also a teacher at the studied school. The methodological design of the research allowed for creating a transdisciplinary and transnational space for ongoing exchange and conversation that made this reflection possible. Both sides evaluated that this has been a successful effort to replace coloniality in knowledge co-construction with a horizontal, polyphonic discourse sensitive to tensions, dilemmas, and disputes in defining descriptive and analytical categories and interpretations.

List of project related output (without publications)

Conference papers

1. Angela Stienen, Stefanie Strulik, Hilda Mar Rodríguez Gómez, Andrés Restrepo Gil: *Transnational Pedagogical Expeditions. Contesting Knowledge through Formative Research in Teacher Education*. International Sociological Association, 5th Forum of Sociology: Knowing Justice in the Anthropocene. Rabat, Morocco, July 6 - 11, 2025.
2. Angela Stienen, Stefanie Strulik: *Transnationale Räume der Wissensproduktion in der Lehrpersonenbildung. Formative Forschung zwischen den Migrationsgesellschaften Kolumbiens und der Schweiz*. Jahreskongress SGBF-SGL: Bildung in einer diversen und komplexen Welt, Luzern, 2-4 of July 2025.
3. Angela Stienen, Stefanie Strulik, Hilda Mar Rodríguez Gómez: *Transnational Spaces of Knowledge Co-Production in Teacher Education between Colombia and Switzerland*. Conference Academic Network of Global Education and Learning-ANGEL: Research in Global Education and Learning: For Democracy, Peace, Human Rights, Sustainability, and Global Social Justice, Berlin, 4-6 of June 2025.
4. Hilda Mar Rodríguez, Angela Stienen, Andrés Restrepo: *Educación inclusiva e intercultural para la escolarización de migrantes en Colombia*. Ciclo *Distinguished Lectures* 'Otras imaginaciones, Otra educación inclusiva'; Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos de Educación Inclusiva (CELEI), on-line, 22 de julio 2025.
5. Andrés Restrepo, Hilda Mar Rodríguez, Angela Stienen: *Educación y migración. La escuela como centro de acogida, bienestar y garantía de derechos*. Congreso de la RED FEIAL Interculturalidades y Educaciones en América Latina. Diálogos, tensiones y alternativas. Eje 3: Movilidad Humana, Territorios-Frontera e Interculturalidad. Popayán (Colombia), agosto 14-16 de 2024.
6. Hilda Mar Rodríguez, Andrés Restrepo: *Partir, desplazarse y llegar: las adaptaciones de una IE a las exigencias de los movimientos humanos*. Seminario de Migraciones, Género y Educación. Pedagogías de la esperanza: caminos para la justicia social, organizado por FAS (Fundación Autónoma Solidaria de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona), Universidad de Baja California, Universidad de Antioquia, octubre 27 de 2023.
7. Hilda Mar Rodríguez Gómez, Andrés Restrepo Gil, Laura Villalba Mojica: *Tacto pedagógico y competencias interculturales para repensar el derecho a una educación inclusiva*, V Bienal Latinoamericana y Caribeña en Primeras infancias, niñeces y juventudes, Cinde, Universidad de Manizales, 17 al 21 de julio 2023.

Diploma thesis at both cooperating universities

1. Manyelay Gaviria Sánchez (2024). La migración en la escuela: Un enfoque desde la emocionalidad de las niñas y los niños del grado Transición 4; Universidad de Antioquia, Facultad de Educación.
2. Paula Castañeda Vallejo (2024). La Escuela como escenario y territorio donde se viven y se perciben los cambios de miradas de lo que significa ser maestra; Universidad de Antioquia, Facultad de Educación.
3. Alejandra Martelo Álvarez (2024). Prácticas de acogida con niños y niñas migrantes en la Institución Educativa Héctor Abad Gómez; Universidad de Antioquia, Facultad de Educación.
4. Nina Lara Evard (2025). The value of bilingual education for Emberá children in an urban context: A qualitative study in Medellín, Colombia. Bachelor Thesis, PHBern, Institute for Primary Education.
5. Michelle Maria Marti (2025). Schule als Schutzraum: Friedenspädagogik zwischen Hoffnung und Herausforderungen in Medellín's Bildungssystem. Bachelor Thesis, PHBern, Institute for Primary Education.

January 2026

Prof. Dr. Angela Stienen and Prof. Hilda Mar Rodríguez Gómez, project coordinators