

## **The intercultural teacher as an agent of change: competencies and profiles for inclusive education**

*O professor intercultural como agente de mudança: competências e perfis para uma educação inclusiva*

*El profesor intercultural como agente de cambio: competencias y perfiles para una educación inclusiva*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the role of the intercultural teacher as an agent of change, highlighting their pedagogical, cultural, and social competencies to address diversity in multicultural contexts, with a focus on the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM). Using a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students and three teachers, selected for their experience in diverse educational settings and their reflective capacity regarding inclusion and interculturality. Data were analyzed through thematic coding, identifying emerging categories and contrasting student and teacher perspectives. Findings indicate that cultural diversity represents both a resource and a challenge: students acknowledge the richness of interacting with multiple languages and cultures, but they note limitations in integration and systematic institutional policies. From the teachers' perspective, three key competencies emerged: cultural, pedagogical, and social, which enable mediation, dialogue promotion, and equity fostering, though their application often relies on individual initiative rather than consolidated structural policies. The study also highlights a gap between theory and practice, with language acting as a central axis of inclusion or exclusion. In conclusion, the intercultural teacher can transform classrooms into spaces of recognition and social justice; however, their impact requires continuous training, practical tools, and institutional support to consolidate inclusion as a core element of university life.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, intercultural education, intercultural teacher, cultural diversity, UAIM.

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## RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza el rol del profesor intercultural como agente de cambio, resaltando sus competencias pedagógicas, culturales y sociales para atender la diversidad en contextos multiculturales, con énfasis en la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM). Con un enfoque cualitativo exploratorio-descriptivo, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a cinco estudiantes y tres docentes, seleccionados por su experiencia en entornos educativos diversos y su disposición reflexiva sobre inclusión e interculturalidad. Los datos se analizaron mediante codificación temática, identificando categorías emergentes y contrastando percepciones estudiantiles y docentes. Los hallazgos muestran que la diversidad cultural representa tanto un recurso como un desafío: los estudiantes reconocen la riqueza de convivir con múltiples lenguas y culturas, pero señalan limitaciones en la integración y en políticas institucionales sistemáticas. Desde la perspectiva docente, emergen tres competencias clave: culturales, pedagógicas y sociales, que permiten mediar, promover el diálogo y fomentar la equidad, aunque su aplicación depende con frecuencia de la iniciativa individual más que de políticas estructurales consolidadas. Se evidencia además una brecha entre la teoría y la práctica, y la lengua se identifica como eje de inclusión o exclusión. En conclusión, el profesor intercultural puede transformar las aulas en espacios de reconocimiento y justicia social, pero su impacto requiere formación continua, herramientas prácticas y respaldo institucional que consoliden la inclusión como un eje central de la vida universitaria.

**Palabras clave:** educación inclusiva, educación intercultural, profesor intercultural, diversidad cultural, UAIM.

## RESUMO

Este estudo analisa o papel do professor intercultural como agente de mudança, destacando suas competências pedagógicas, culturais e sociais para atender à diversidade em contextos multiculturais, com ênfase na Universidade Autónoma Indígena do México (UAIM). Com uma abordagem qualitativa exploratória-descritiva, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas com cinco estudantes e três docentes, selecionados por sua experiência em ambientes educacionais diversos e sua disposição reflexiva em relação à inclusão e à interculturalidade. Os dados foram analisados por meio de codificação temática, identificando categorias emergentes e contrastando as percepções de estudantes e professores. Os resultados mostram que a diversidade cultural representa tanto um recurso quanto um desafio: os estudantes reconhecem a riqueza de conviver com múltiplas línguas e culturas, mas apontam limitações na integração e na ausência de políticas institucionais sistemáticas. Do ponto de vista dos docentes, emergem três competências-chave — culturais, pedagógicas e sociais — que permitem mediar, promover o diálogo e fomentar a equidade, embora sua aplicação dependa frequentemente da iniciativa individual mais do que de políticas estruturais consolidadas. Além disso, evidencia-se uma lacuna entre a teoria e a prática, e a língua é identificada como eixo de inclusão ou exclusão. Conclui-se que o professor intercultural pode transformar as salas de aula em espaços de reconhecimento e justiça social, mas seu impacto requer formação contínua, ferramentas práticas e apoio institucional que consolidem a inclusão como eixo central da vida universitária.

**Palavras-chave:** educação inclusiva, educação intercultural, professor intercultural, diversidade cultural, UAIM.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive and intercultural education has become a guiding principle within Mexico's educational policies, aimed at guaranteeing equitable, quality education for all students, irrespective of their cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic background. This approach

recognises diversity as an asset and promotes harmonious coexistence amongst individuals and communities, respecting and valuing their differences and rights within a framework of social inclusion (UNESCO, 2005; SEP, 2018).

Within this context, the teacher emerges as a fundamental agent of change. Their role transcends the mere transmission of knowledge, transforming them into a facilitator of learning who adapts their pedagogical practices to address student diversity. Sebastián-Heredero (2017) emphasises that a teacher's personal competencies, acquired both in their initial training and their continuous professional development, are essential for the effective implementation of inclusive education. Similarly, Díaz Barriga (2019) notes that intercultural teachers require sensitivity towards cultural differences and the skills to generate equitable educational environments that foster participation from all students.

Mexico, with its rich ethnic and cultural diversity, faces significant challenges in implementing inclusive and intercultural education. Despite normative advances, such as the National Strategy for Inclusive Education and intercultural education programmes, structural and attitudinal barriers persist, hindering the full inclusion of students from indigenous communities, migrant backgrounds, and those with disabilities. These barriers necessitate that teachers develop specific competencies to address diversity and ensure every student has access to meaningful learning opportunities.

This article aims to study and analyse the role of the intercultural teacher as an agent of change, as well as to examine the educational profiles of intercultural teachers in Mexico, exploring their role as change agents in constructing inclusive education. Through a literature review and analysis of educational policies, it seeks to identify the essential characteristics teachers must possess to confront the challenges of cultural diversity and guarantee quality education for all.

## **Inclusive Education**

To speak of inclusive education necessitates recognising the urgency of understanding the rapid changes characterising modernity, especially when applied to the study of communities and ethnic groups in Latin America. It is therefore necessary to analyse educational practices that confront or disengage from power, whether through direct or indirect discourse, across political, economic, cultural, and, principally, educational dimensions.

The diagnosis of education in Mexico provides a referent for innovation that could prove useful for neighbouring countries facing similar challenges. It can be argued that development in programmes and institutions occurs when educational policies explicitly include the perspective of inclusion. In recent years, the term "intercultural" has been used routinely as a synonym for respect and the inclusion of cultural diversity, positing that inclusion represents coexistence and intercultural dialogue. However, this theoretical vision requires evaluation in practice, for contrasts, conflicts, domination, racism, exclusion, and the marginalisation of peoples persist, offering testimony to the distance between theory and reality (Duk & Murillo, 2016).

García Segura (2004) notes that educational policy in Mexico is grounded in the principles of the Mexican Revolution and the ideas of Vasconcelos, although its origins trace back to Independence in 1810. During this period, the new nation adopted Spanish as the official language without considering those who spoke other mother tongues, imposing a Western educational model that did not value existing cultural diversity. Thus, from its inception, state-implemented education did not contemplate multiculturalism, native languages, or

cultural traditions, a situation underscoring the importance of critically analysing how inclusion materialises in different educational centres and institutional settings, the central objective of this research.

For his part, Arroyo González (2013) indicates that the term “inclusion” was initially associated with special educational needs but was subsequently broadened to encompass all of education, promoting the idea that schools must be accessible to all children, regardless of their characteristics or limitations. This necessity stems from the high levels of exclusion present in educational institutions, a situation which has motivated the formulation of governmental policies and pressure from civil society to guarantee inclusion without discrimination.

Inclusive education is a complex, multidimensional concept that has evolved into an aspiration of the international public agenda, influencing educational policy decisions and the organisation of school institutions (Duk & Murillo, 2016). It therefore seeks to guarantee the right to quality education for all of society, promoting spaces where individuals can freely express their ideas and participate actively in the construction of knowledge, from theory to daily practice (Solís del Moral & Tinajero Villavicencio, 2022).

In Mexico, inclusive education gained central relevance during the 2018-2024 administration with the implementation of the New Mexican School (Nueva Escuela Mexicana - NEM), enshrined in the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, the General Law of Education, and other educational policy documents (SEP, 2018). The General Law of Education establishes in its Article 62 that the State must guarantee inclusive education at all levels, promoting the full participation of marginalised students or those at risk of exclusion, and ensuring reasonable adjustments to meet their specific needs. Although some reforms have faced legal challenges, their implementation reflects the urgency of translating inclusion theory into effective practice within educational institutions (Mendoza & Jiménez, 2018).

Inclusion implies not only equity and respect for diversity but also the active participation of the educational community and society at large. This process requires raising awareness and training teachers, administrators, and those responsible for curricula to ensure that values of respect, solidarity, and tolerance are integrated into school life and society (Soto Calderón, 2003; Heward, 1997). The effective implementation of inclusion faces challenges related to individualism, racism, and social inequality, making it urgent to promote an approach centred on harmonious coexistence and the peaceful resolution of conflicts (Cruz, 2020).

Inclusive education is a political-pedagogical project that transforms the school, promoting equality, equity, and participation, and moving beyond the mere integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools (Mendoza Méndez, 2018). For this education to be effective, it must guarantee pedagogical, technological, and welfare support that reduces barriers to learning and fosters participation from all students, adapting the educational system to their needs (Garnique-Castro & Gutiérrez-Vidrio, 2012).

In this sense, Mexico has advanced in implementing inclusive educational policies, although significant challenges persist in guaranteeing that all students, including those with special educational needs, have access to education on equal terms (Serrato & García, 2014). Inclusive education requires coordinated efforts amongst institutions, families, and society in general, promoting values of respect, equity, and participation from the home to the school, thereby contributing to the construction of a more just and equitable society (Pegalajar Palomino & Colmenero Ruiz, 2017).

## Intercultural Education in Mexico

Interculturality in Mexico is a field in constant evolution, marked by the confluence of diverse traditions and perspectives. Whilst indigenism has been historically influential, shaping intercultural policies and practices, multiple approaches coexist today. On one hand, essentialist visions of culture and identity persist, tending to homogenise indigenous peoples. On the other hand, broader notions of interculturality are emerging, seeking to include diverse social and cultural groups. This diversity of approaches generates a complex and dynamic debate about the most suitable models, concepts, and practices for promoting interculturality in education.

De la Cruz (2012) mentions that in Mexico, governmental organisations present a series of political promises and discourses, along with their good intentions practised in education and pedagogy, waving a flag under the name of intercultural education that appears to protect minority groups. In reality, however, these educational institutions grapple with the problem of exclusion and discrimination of multiple and different social identities as a product of globalisation. For this reason, intercultural schools find themselves at a crossroads between government actions and the proposals of theoretical researchers, social activists, and broad indigenous movements. This is because education implicitly carries its conceptualisation of man in society based on the interests of hegemonic groups.

Intercultural universities are novel projects, offering an alternative to conventional degree programmes for indigenous regions. However, bureaucratic, financial, academic, and political problems are insufficient to meet the demand of marginalised sectors, particularly the indigenous regions that must address cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity (Matos, 2018a). For a relationship of interculturality to truly occur within these educational institutions, different groups must coexist and interact within the same space based on active interaction founded on respect, equality, and acceptance of the 'other' for their difference, yielding highly enriching results (Schmelkes, 2009).

The agreement processes between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the federal government in 1996 gave impetus to intercultural universities, driven by an education demanded by indigenous peoples, which would thereby promote cultural reclamation processes. However, this was not the case; over a ten-year process, foci of control by federal government powers have silently permeated them. When referring to intercultural education, it is indispensable to contribute to a quality education, without admitting asymmetries. It must be guided by an appropriate path that defers to cultural groups and the context of the mestizo population, because education must be for the entire population. If it is not for everyone, it is not interculturality (Schmelkes, 2018).

Originally, the UAIM was created with the purpose of contributing to community development and bringing higher education closer to the indigenous communities of Northwestern Sinaloa, without discounting the possibility of including indigenous youth from other states by supporting them with accommodation and dining facilities. One of the problems it presented from its inception was the lack of federal government funding, as the project did not fit within other university systems or subsystems. Consequently, in 2005 it became part of the subsystem of intercultural universities (Guerra, Meza & Angulo, 2006).

As previously outlined, the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México is an intercultural educational institution and therefore has an interest in developing intercultural curricula and academic activities.

For his part, Sáez (2006) maintains that to educate is to transform, modify, and develop. To educate interculturally is to develop the construction of a shared reality of coexistence,

where no one feels in possession of the truth, the sole and universal depository of truth. Education must serve to modify attitudes regarding cultural diversity and to review and transform our cultural components.

### **The Intercultural Teacher as an Agent of Change: Competencies and Profiles**

The role of the intercultural teacher in contemporary education has acquired growing relevance, particularly in contexts such as Mexico and Latin America, where cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is evident in classrooms. This teacher not only transmits knowledge but also acts as a mediator between different cultural realities, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and educational inclusion (Schmelkes, 2009). In this sense, the figure of the intercultural teacher is conceived as an agent of social change capable of transforming traditional educational dynamics, promoting learning that values diversity as a pedagogical and social resource.

Intercultural education requires teachers to develop specific competencies that transcend mastery of academic content. Amongst these, cultural sensitivity, the capacity for dialogue, and the aptitude for generating spaces of equitable participation, where all voices are heard and respected, stand out (Arroyo González, 2013). The intercultural teacher must be aware of the historical and social inequalities affecting indigenous communities and other marginalised groups and adapt their pedagogical strategies to guarantee all students access to a quality education (Matos, 2018b).

Furthermore, constructing an intercultural teaching profile implies combining pedagogical, social, and ethical skills. Intercultural pedagogy demands not only the planning of inclusive activities but also the capacity for critical reflection on one's own prejudices and institutional practices, fostering a collaborative and respectful learning environment (Merino, 2021). The teacher thus becomes a facilitator who promotes the active participation of the educational community and a promoter of inclusive policies that allow for the overcoming of cultural, linguistic, and social barriers (Dietz, 2014).

It is important to note that the effectiveness of the intercultural teacher as an agent of change does not depend solely on their academic preparation but also on their ethical and social commitment. Intercultural education cannot be reduced to curricular content; it requires the integration of values such as tolerance, solidarity, equity, and respect for human diversity into the daily practice of the classroom (Raesfeld & Durán, 2018). Only through this combination of professional competencies and humanistic commitment can an inclusive education be built that contributes to the integral development of all students, promoting a more equitable society respectful of cultural diversity.

The intercultural teacher plays a fundamental role as a catalyst for educational and social changes. Their profile requires competencies that integrate knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and mediation skills, with an ethical and humanised focus that allows for the transformation of educational institutions into inclusive and equitable spaces (Schmelkes, 2009; Matos, 2018). In this sense, the continuous training and updating of these teachers constitutes a strategic axis for strengthening intercultural education and advancing towards more just and cohesive societies.

### **Methodology**

This research was conducted within a qualitative framework, specifically exploratory-descriptive, with the purpose of understanding how the intercultural teacher can act as an agent of change in contexts of inclusive education and which competencies and profiles

emerge from this interaction. This approach is supported by Latin American work which has indicated that intercultural education requires not only formal policies but also deep interpretations from teaching experience to comprehend its effectiveness (Schmelkes & Ballesteros, 2022). Personal semi-structured interviews were chosen as the central instrument, as they allow the necessary openness to capture the complexity of discourses, attitudes, and practices, similar to their use in prior research in culturally diverse contexts such as Mexico and other Latin American countries (Vásquez-Rosas & Vizuela-Carpio, 2025; Salguero Escobar, 2025).

The sample was selected intentionally according to inclusion criteria designed to ensure participants could provide rich data on intercultural competencies in inclusive education: (a) having participated or currently participating in educational processes with cultural diversity; (b) being a student or working at UAIM; (c) demonstrating a voluntary willingness to be interviewed and reflect; (d) possessing reflective capacity regarding teaching, inclusion, and interculturality. In this manner, five university students and three teachers who met the stated criteria were interviewed.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in two main periods: during 2023 and 2024. In 2023, the first phase was carried out with Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3 on 11 February in Mochicahui, El Fuerte; and with Student 4 on 10 March in the same locality. In 2024, the second phase was conducted with Student 5 on 18 April in Mochicahui; with Agustín F. Clarissa on 23 May in Los Mochis, Ahome; with Delgado Juan Antonio on 15 June in Mochicahui; and with Rochin N. Rosario on 10 June, also in Mochicahui. Each interview was personal and recorded with informed consent, complemented by field notes to capture non-verbal or contextual dimensions.

For data analysis, thematic coding was adopted, similar to that used in other Latin American studies on interculturality, comprising full transcription, exploratory reading, identification of units of meaning, grouping into emerging categories, and constant comparisons between participants (Gómez Zermeño, 2022). Internal validity was attended to through contrasts between student and teacher discourses, and researcher reflexivity to identify potential biases.

## Results

The research allowed for the identification that cultural diversity at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM) constitutes both a strength and a challenge for teaching practice. In the interviews, students highlighted that the presence of different ethnic groups and languages in the classroom generates a dynamic learning environment, albeit not without tensions. One participant noted that *“In reality, for those of us who come from another culture, it is a struggle to integrate ourselves and be integrated into the group; it doesn’t happen quickly, it takes time to adapt. I think it depends on how the others are. In my case, I found that in my group they only speak Spanish, so as they gave me openings, I gradually integrated”* (Student 1, personal interview, 2023). This testimony reflects what various authors have documented: that interculturality in the classroom can be reduced to a symbolic level if not accompanied by concrete practices of recognition and valuation (Moriña, Sandoval & Carnerero, 2020).

The integration of indigenous students or those from different cultural backgrounds does not always occur fluidly. In the words of one interviewee: *“The institution does not have any programme for student integration; there is a language nest programme, but the objective of this language nest is to sectorise and exclude the speakers, it’s like a self-marginalisation and exclusion of themselves (of the speakers), each with their own closed little groups, they*

*don't engage in dialogue with other cultures or languages"* (Student 2, personal interview, 2023). This experience coincides with what was noted by Fernández Batanero, Hernández Fernández and Colmenero Ruiz (2021), who found that teachers often value diversity but lack the linguistic and cultural competencies to support students from indigenous communities. In the case of UAIM, the lack of systematic institutional programmes limits the consolidation of inclusion efforts beyond the willingness of some teachers.

When analysing perceptions of interculturality, a critical vision emerged amongst participants. Whilst some students identified it as *"something that nurtures camaraderie, the knowledge of people, and continues to be mentioned; the institution is intercultural in theory because here sometimes we see that the teachers and classmates don't take much account of the intercultural aspect. I think interculturality is an encounter of various cultures or respect for cultures, but here it is not valued as one might believe, or at least that's what I see. Here the teachers arrive, give their class, and leave. It's true there is a subject which is the Yoreme language, but in reality, those of us who only speak Spanish feel that they impose that language a lot on us, and if you don't learn it, they give you a very low grade, and I think that's not right"*, others indicated that it remains *"more in discourse than in real practice"* (Student 3, personal interview, 2023).

*"It is intercultural here at UAIM, because it receives many people from different ethnicities, you could say from different parts of the country, from Chiapas, from Nayarit, from Sonora, those from here, so that's why it's intercultural, because they receive from different ethnicities, that is, they have other languages, their main language is not Spanish, it's the one from where they belong"* expressed (Student 4, personal interview, 2023).

These findings reflect what Gómez Zermeño (2022) describes in her studies on community instructors in Chiapas: interculturality is often approached from a theoretical plane but still faces gaps in practical implementation in the classroom.

From the teacher's perspective, in the fieldwork conducted, different options and versions were observed where interesting debates on the topic of interculturality within an intercultural institution could be generated, as presented in this research. In this case, dialogue was continued with teachers from the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM) related to the question: How do you perceive the topic of interculturality as a teacher? Responding:

*"The topic of interculturality is a critical topic, a topic that invites us to debates, but in my personal opinion, I can define interculturality as a space of coexistence amongst which different cultures interrelate, in which there must be full respect between the equalities that converge without an imposition that may exist between cultures. However, we know that in reality there is imposition of cultures, right? An example: the Mixe community over the Yoremes or vice versa, the Yoremes over the Mixes. Why? Because it depends on the minorities, it depends on the group that dominates in their spaces or territories as we find them in UAIM where more Yoreme Mayo converge, but that doesn't mean there isn't residence of other peoples. I reiterate, interculturality has not been conceived by some teachers as that reality purely where respect and equality should prevail and be transmitted. There are teachers who are still resistant to that part as an exercise, as teaching work. I don't mean to say they don't put it into practice, but they are not involved. Why? I have had experience, even information from students, that sometimes the same teachers exercise inequality, racism, discrimination, and as part of this university which is intercultural, I feel we should be fighting against those types of practices and promoting more spaces for coexistence. I have seen teachers who, as if they don't want to update themselves on the information in discussion, for example, if we speak related to the Yoreme language, there*

*should also be teachers practising at least orality (speech) of the most basic, greetings of some basic words, not to mention writing. Sometimes we criticise the student because they don't speak Spanish well or because they don't write a good essay in Castilian, when teachers in intercultural education should put themselves in the student's place and feel how they struggle against those spaces inside the university. It must be clarified that perhaps many teachers have knowledge within the theoretical but don't strive to put intercultural education into practice, rather they only simulate it within the classrooms. At least in our university, intercultural education is not yet practised, I conclude" (Agustín, personal interview, 2024).*

On this topic, it is apparent that there exist divided opinions, versions, and ideologies, as the interviewees evidenced that their understanding of interculturality has been transforming with practice. As mentioned by one professor:

*"I did not agree with the concept of interculturality, to begin with, I was unaware from a social point of view, I looked at it from a political and economic point of view more than a social one. When Dr. Silvia Schmelkes published her book on intercultural universities, I began to understand and comprehend the meaning, right? But it did not cease to be a merely political meaning. Why? Because those schools were initiated along with a group of professionals from the missive or from Vicente Fox Quezada's government, so the issue I saw it as still politicised; I still see it the same, but there is a very own aspect in the human aspect that was what led us in any case to understand and comprehend that meaning of interculturality. So when I saw the young people who came from different parts, because we began with a school precisely for indigenous and non-indigenous, because they were poor indigenous and non-indigenous or poor yoris from this region, then with that multitude of cultures that the university received, we had the need to understand interculturality in practice. It was not much need to delve into books, that is, into theorists. So I believe the concept of interculturality is all based on practice with patience and patience of ourselves. We saw the young people that they have to grow in the educational sphere, but for that, patience, comprehension, humanism, love were needed, that without understanding the meaning of interculturality" (Delgado Juan Antonio, personal interview, 2024).*

*Another teacher stated: "I want to tell you that at UAIM since its beginnings, the topic of interculturality has always been handled with the students, not as knowing the concept or definition as now, but in practice it has always been handled, uniting the students, respecting the ethnic groups, because in the university there are many ethnic groups, and subsequently the term interculturality is born or expands in the institution, but the first teachers practised from the beginning without knowing exactly the term interculturality. That's why when UAIM entered amongst the intercultural institutions, I can say that the first teachers did not have much conflict because we were already practising. I want to clarify that practising interculturality is not only knowing the concept but also doing the practice in all aspects towards the young people. Many teachers here do not profess it; they believe that only working in the academic a few hours and they already fulfil and practise interculturality, but the reality is different. We live in a world in constant change, and we must have clear that the responsibility of a teacher goes beyond the classrooms, it must be a commitment, she responded" (Rochin N. Rosario, personal interview, 2024).*

These reflections are linked to what was posed by Schmelkes and Ballesteros (2022), who maintain that intercultural teacher training requires both academic knowledge and ethical attitudes to promote social justice in educational contexts.

In relation to inclusive education, students perceive advances but also limitations. One participant mentioned: *"Inclusion exists because you learn a lot from all those people*

*because they bring a very different culture, very different. As I told you, I don't speak the language, I am mestiza, I can tell you I am urban, so for me it is something very beautiful and yes, you learn a lot from them, taking them into account because in fact we would be interested in them opening up to us. Many times they are inhibited from speaking their language for fear that we would laugh at them, but I think they should be proud of their language, yes. I can tell you it is one of the important things in our lives"* (Student 5, personal interview, 2024). This contrast shows the tension between individual inclusive practices and the absence of clear institutional policies, which coincides with what was noted by Moriña (2017), who warns that inclusion in higher education often depends on isolated initiatives rather than a structural commitment.

Three major areas of competencies that participants attribute to the intercultural teacher emerged from the analysis: (a) cultural competencies, such as knowledge of indigenous languages and respect for community knowledge; (b) pedagogical competencies, related to the ability to adapt methods, assess in a fair and contextualised manner, and integrate diversity into the curriculum; and (c) social competencies, such as empathy, cultural mediation, and commitment to equity. These dimensions coincide with what has been identified in recent studies by Valerij Dermol et al. (2021), who highlight that although teachers express positive attitudes towards diversity, they still require further development in specific knowledge and practical tools to transform inclusion into a reality.

The testimonies gathered at UAIM show clearly the tension between the objective presence of diversity (ethnic groups and languages distributed across units) and the subjective experience of student integration: "when we entered the university, we felt like strangers; the majority only speak Spanish, and sometimes our languages seem invisible" (Student 2, personal interview, 2023). This statement touches on a theoretical core: demographic diversity does not automatically translate into real inclusion if there are no pedagogical and political mediations that recognise plurilingualism as a pedagogical resource.

Furthermore, discrepancies between theory and teaching practice emerge in the interviews: several teachers recognise interculturality in the abstract but admit that their daily practice does not always reflect it ("at first we thought interculturality was just teaching different groups; later we understood that it is recognising them, giving them space, listening to them", Delgado J. A., 2024). The previous interview gives us a sample that the existing training is fragmentary and depends largely on individual initiatives, which limits the consolidation of systematic intercultural practices.

Another critical aspect arising from the data is the centrality of language as an axis of inclusion or exclusion: students report feeling that the indigenous language subject sometimes functions as a mechanism of sanction rather than recognition, "if you don't learn it, they give you a very low grade, and I think that's not right" (Student 3, 2023), which reveals assessment practices that are insensitive to plurilingual contexts. This problem is consistent with recent reviews that warn that linguistic inclusion requires not only subjects but changes in assessment, teacher training, and institutional policies (Reyes Guillén, 2024), since the mere curricular offering of languages does not guarantee effective respect nor linguistic justice.

The inclusive strategies that some teachers describe personalised attention, adaptation of tasks, sensitisation of groups, use of virtual classes as support, show professional willingness but also their episodic nature. They provide a useful reading here: their instrument and analysis of competencies for inclusive education emphasise that teacher beliefs and self-efficacy are central for sustainable inclusive practices; however, these beliefs must translate into observable and measurable capacities (for example, design of

differentiated activities, flexible assessment, cultural mediation). In UAIM, this dynamic is observed: there are beliefs and good intentions, but there is still a lack of systematic institutional instruments that measure and foster concrete capacities in the teaching staff. This explains why inclusion is verified unevenly between classrooms and teachers.

Additionally, teacher training oriented towards interculturality must integrate dialogic and evidence-based approaches; in Mexico, there are training experiences that show that dialogic training produces changes in pedagogical practice (for example, training programmes based on dialogicity and evidence reported in Mexican contexts). In relation to UAIM, this suggests that specific training sessions must be strengthened with continuous and evaluable training models that promote validated pedagogical instruments for diversity.

The discussion on intercultural competencies in higher education finds empirical support in systematic reviews: Reyes Guillén (2024) reviewed the evidence on intercultural competencies in higher education and concluded that the most effective approaches combine affective (empathy, openness), cognitive (knowledge of other worldviews), and practical (communicative and methodological skills) elements, integrated into curricular and extracurricular experiences. That three-dimensional framework (affective-cognitive-practical) is partially observed in UAIM: teachers show empathy and willingness (affective dimension), some possess theoretical knowledge (cognitive dimension), but standardised practical tools are limited. The critical consequence is that, without coherence between the three dimensions, the teacher's role as an agent of change is weakened, and interculturality runs the risk of remaining as a statement rather than a transformative practice.

## Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyse the intercultural teacher as an agent of change, emphasising the competencies and profiles that can favour the construction of an inclusive education within the framework of Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México. Throughout the work, multiple voices and experiences were identified that demonstrate both the advances and the pending challenges in this process. The testimonies of students and teachers allowed for the visualisation that interculturality is a daily reality expressed in classrooms, in social interactions, and in the way cultural, linguistic, and social differences are recognised.

The central findings show that teachers play a decisive role in how inclusion is lived. Their work is not limited to imparting academic content but involves assuming the role of cultural mediators, capable of building bridges between different ways of seeing and understanding the world. From this perspective, the intercultural teacher is configured as a transformative actor who, by opening spaces for dialogue and recognition, generates conditions for diversity to become a shared wealth and not a factor of division.

The research allowed us to note that, although there is willingness and sensitivity in several teachers, inclusive practice is not always concretised with the necessary force. In some cases, inclusion remains subject to the personal initiative of the teacher, causing it to be experienced in a fragmented and unequal manner. For certain students, this translates into adapted learning opportunities and respectful treatment; however, others perceive that their languages, traditions, or ways of life do not find a legitimate place in the classroom. This reality poses a contradiction between the institutional discourse of interculturality and the real practices that develop in university life.

The role of the intercultural teacher, therefore, acquires a double dimension. At one level, they are recognised as a facilitator of academic learning; but at a second and deeper level,

they are identified as an agent of social change. It is the teacher who, through their sensitivity, pedagogical strategies, and capacity for listening, can make the difference between a student who feels integrated and valued, and another who perceives themselves as foreign or invisible. Interculturality thus becomes a terrain where not only academic success is at stake, but also the dignity and sense of belonging of each student.

Inclusive education, in this context, presents itself as an ideal under construction. Students recognise efforts and advances, especially when teachers adapt tasks, extend deadlines, or generate dialogue spaces in which their knowledge is valued. However, they also underline limitations, such as the absence of clear support policies, the lack of specialised training for teachers, and the invisibilisation of native languages. All this makes evident that inclusion cannot depend exclusively on individual wills, but requires sustained institutional backing that articulates training programmes, pedagogical resources, and clear guidelines that strengthen teaching practice.

From a broader perspective, the results of this research transcend the university sphere to project onto society. The training of teachers with intercultural and inclusive competencies not only impacts the academic success of students but contributes to the construction of more just and respectful communities. Each classroom that manages to integrate cultural diversity with equity becomes a space of resistance against homogenisation and discrimination. In this sense, the university is not only a place for transmitting knowledge but a social laboratory where forms of coexistence are rehearsed that can radiate to society as a whole.

The gathered testimonies show that students do not only seek to acquire technical or professional knowledge but aspire for their identity, language, and culture to be recognised in the educational process. The intercultural university, therefore, has the responsibility to be a space where community knowledge dialogues on equal terms with scientific and academic knowledge. This openness not only enriches students from indigenous communities but also broadens the horizon of all members of the university community by exposing them to new ways of understanding the world.

The research clearly demonstrates that the development of inclusive education is not a linear or completed path, but a process of continuous transformation. The interviewed teachers state that they have transitioned from an initial conception of interculturality as simple coexistence to a more critical understanding, which involves active recognition, mutual respect, and a commitment to social justice. This transition is significant as it demonstrates that intercultural competencies are not acquired automatically, but are developed through practice, reflection, and continuous professional development.

Now, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of this study. Firstly, it is a qualitative investigation based on a reduced number of interviews, conducted in a particular geographical context. This prevents generalising the findings to all intercultural universities or other educational levels. Secondly, the information obtained is based on perceptions, which leaves open the need to complement it with direct observations in the classroom, documentary analysis, and comparative studies. Finally, by focusing on a specific period, the research does not allow for the evaluation of the long-term evolution of inclusive practices nor the sustained impact of institutional policies on student trajectories.

These limitations, however, open valuable opportunities for future research. It will be necessary to expand the sample to different educational contexts, incorporate mixed methodologies that combine the depth of the interview with the breadth of surveys and quantitative measurements, and conduct longitudinal studies that account for the evolution

of teaching competencies and the impact on student retention and academic success. It would also be pertinent to explore the relationship between the interculturality discourses of institutions and their reflection in daily pedagogical practice, as well as to analyse how public policies can enhance or limit inclusive efforts in intercultural universities.

In conclusion, the intercultural teacher has the potential to become a true agent of change, capable of transforming classrooms into spaces of encounter, recognition, and justice. However, for this potential to materialise, individual goodwill is not enough: institutional commitment, specialised training, and the creation of conditions that strengthen inclusion as a structural axis of university life are required. Inclusive education should not be understood as an already achieved goal but as a permanent project in which each teaching action, each university policy, and each student experience contribute to its development. The path towards an education that fully recognises and values cultural diversity is underway but still demands firm and sustained steps to consolidate a more just, equitable, and humane university.

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