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Primary sources in the teaching of national history and critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU students

Fuentes primarias en la enseñanza de la historia nacional y pensamiento crítico en estudiantes de 3.º BGU

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of national history in Ecuadorian upper secondary school still relies on textbooks and memorization, since primary sources appear rarely and are almost never assessed as evidence. The study therefore aimed to analyze primary sources in the teaching of national history and critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU students. A descriptive, documentary and comparative methodology was used, taking as corpus 25 sources (1991-2025) from Ecuador, Latin America, Spain and the English-speaking world, contrasted through matrices. The results showed that interventions with documents improve analysis, interpretation and evaluation, while textbooks and curricula reduce them to illustration. It was concluded that critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU depends on turning each national source into a problem of provenance, context and corroboration.

Descriptors: history education; national history; critical thinking. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

La enseñanza de la historia nacional en el bachillerato ecuatoriano sigue apoyada en el libro de texto y en la memorización, por cuanto las fuentes primarias aparecen poco y casi nunca se evalúan como evidencia. Es así que el estudio se planteó como objetivo analizar las fuentes primarias en la enseñanza de la historia nacional y el pensamiento crítico en estudiantes de 3.º BGU. En este sentido se empleó una metodología descriptiva, documental y comparativa, teniéndose como corpus 25 fuentes (1991-2025) de Ecuador, Latinoamérica, España y el ámbito anglosajón, contrastadas mediante matrices. Entre los resultados se obtuvo que las intervenciones con documentos mejoran el análisis, la interpretación y la evaluación, mientras libros y currículos los relegan a ilustración. Entre las conclusiones se estableció que el pensamiento crítico en 3.º BGU depende de convertir cada fuente nacional en un problema de procedencia, contexto y contraste.

Descriptores: enseñanza de la historia; historia nacional; pensamiento crítico. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

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Research Articles Section

INTRODUCTION

When Nasimba-Mera & Fraga-Luque (2025) reviewed the 121 activities in the History textbook that Ecuador's Ministry of Education distributed in 2020 for the first year of upper secondary school, they found that only six, that is, 5.0%, worked with historical sources, while 62% were answered with short questions and 58.7% remained at the level of factual knowledge, so that only two activities reached the application level in Marzano and Kendall's taxonomy. In line with this finding, the scene repeated in many classrooms of the Unified General Baccalaureate (Bachillerato General Unificado, BGU) is that of a student copying dates and names from the Quito Revolution or the founding of the Republic without ever having read the act, proclamation or letter that gave rise to those events.

For its part, the national curriculum in force since 2016 places History within the Social Sciences area of the BGU and declares among its purposes the development of critical thinking and an understanding of the processes that shaped the country (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016), which reveals an evident gap between what the regulations require and what the materials offer. In fact, Sáez-Rosenkranz & Gámez-Ceruelo (2024) analyzed 169 works on primary sources in history education produced between 1989 and 2023 and found that only 2.37% came from Ecuador, compared with 13.02% from Peru and 57% from Spain, a figure that reveals how little the subject has been studied in the country.

At the conceptual level, the relationship between sources and critical thinking has a precise genealogy, since Wineburg (1991), comparing historians and high school students as they worked with documents and paintings about the Battle of Lexington, showed that experts read each text by asking who wrote it, when and with what intention, while students look in it for data to memorize. Later, Seixas (2017) framed this practice within a model of historical thinking with six concepts, among them evidence, and Santisteban-Fernández (2010) brought it into the Spanish-speaking context by placing the interpretation of sources as one of the four competences that make it possible to educate democratic citizens.

However, the presence of documents in the classroom does not in itself guarantee more rigorous thinking, and Gómez-Carrasco et al. (2014) warn that a source becomes evidence only when the student subjects it to a method of contrast, instead of accepting it as an illustration of the textbook narrative. Similarly, Abrami et al. (2015), in a meta-analysis published in *Review of Educational Research*, found that critical thinking improves when instruction combines dialogue, exposure to authentic problems and teacher mentoring, conditions that work with primary sources can bring together if it is designed for that purpose.

But what do the studies say when compared across countries, educational levels and types of intervention, and what lessons do they offer for a third year of upper secondary school that closes school education with the history of Ecuador? Based on the above, the research aims to analyze primary sources in the teaching of national history and critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU students, in order to contrast what textbooks, curricula and classroom interventions report and to infer teaching criteria applicable to the Ecuadorian context.

METHOD

The methodology used is descriptive, documentary and comparative, since the findings of previous studies were described, the work was carried out exclusively with published documents and the results were contrasted according to country, educational level, type of source and teaching strategy, following the logic that Martínez-Hita et al. (2022) applied when comparing the presence of historical thinking in the curricula of ten countries. Accordingly, a corpus of 25 sources published between 1991 and 2025 was assembled, of which 24 are articles in peer-reviewed journals and one is the official Ecuadorian curriculum of 2016, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Protocol of the comparative documentary review*.

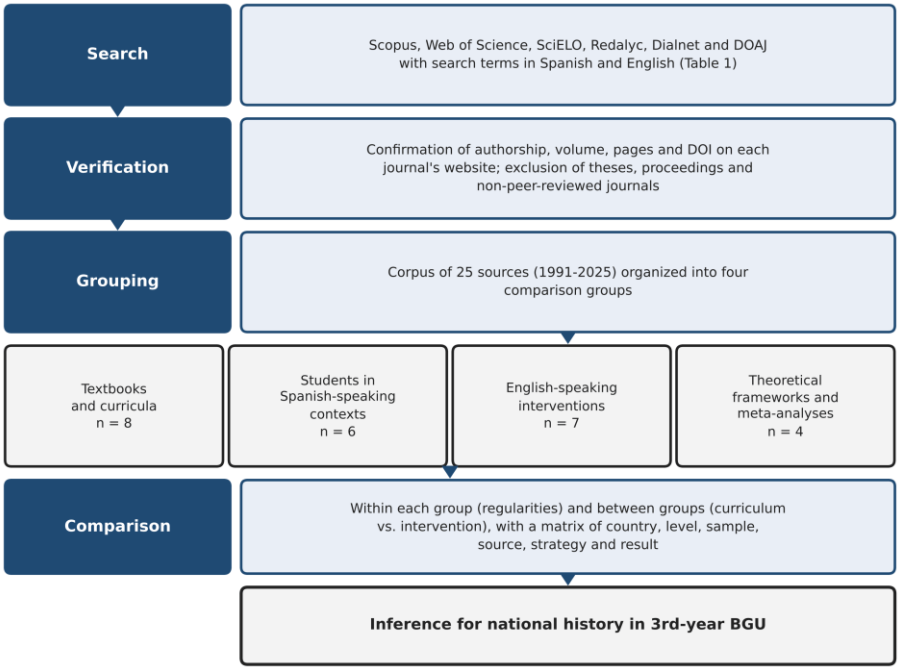
Element	Description
Type of study	Descriptive, documentary and comparative
Databases consulted	Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet and DOAJ; website of Ecuador's Ministry of Education
Search terms	("fuentes primarias" OR "primary sources" OR "documentos históricos") AND ("pensamiento histórico" OR "historical thinking" OR "pensamiento crítico" OR "critical thinking") AND ("secundaria" OR "bachillerato" OR "high school")
Period	1991-2025
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed articles with a DOI or verifiable record; studies on sources, historical or critical thinking in secondary and upper secondary education; official Ecuadorian curriculum
Exclusion criteria	Theses, conference proceedings, press, blogs, non-peer-reviewed or predatory journals and duplicate records
Comparison groups	Textbooks and curricula (n = 8); students in Spanish-speaking contexts (n = 6); interventions and studies from the English-speaking world (n = 7); theoretical frameworks and meta-analyses (n = 4)
Comparison criteria	Country, educational level, sample, type of source, strategy and result related to critical thinking

Note: developed in-house.

Regarding the procedure, the search was carried out in Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet and DOAJ, and each record was verified on the journal's website to confirm authorship, volume, pages and DOI, while theses, conference proceedings and non-peer-reviewed journals or those of doubtful editorial quality were discarded. Subsequently, the corpus was organized into three comparison groups, namely studies on textbooks and curricula, studies with students in Spanish-speaking contexts and intervention studies in the English-speaking world, so that each group was examined with a documentary matrix that recorded country, level, sample, type of source and result related to critical thinking.

Finally, the comparison was carried out in two stages, first within each group, to identify regularities, and then between groups, to contrast what the curricula propose with what the interventions achieve, so that the projection toward 3rd-year BGU is presented as the authors' inference from this triangulation. Figure 1 represents the route followed.

Figure 1. *Route of the comparative documentary review*.



Note: developed in-house.

RESULTS

The group of studies that examines materials and programs offers a comparative reading with a pattern that repeats itself from Lima to Quito and from Chillán to Murcia. Thus, Valle-Taiman (2011) reviewed four Peruvian textbooks for the third and fourth years of secondary school, published by Santillana and Norma, and found that, although they included numerous written sources, none explained what a source is or proposed activities for classifying sources or evaluating their reliability, while essay writing appeared in 2% of the activities of only one publisher. In the Ecuadorian case, Nasimba-Mera & Fraga-Luque (2025) found that the source-based activities in the first-year upper secondary textbook were limited to four combinations of document and image and two text commentaries.

With regard to curricula, Moreno-Vera et al. (2023) designed a rubric validated through expert judgment to analyze the assessment criteria of the Spanish baccalaureate and found that the 2022 decree gives greater presence to historical thinking competences and raises their cognitive level compared with the 2014 decree, while Martínez-Hita et al. (2022) found that most of the curricula of Canada, the United States, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Australia, England, Portugal, France and Spain incorporate historical thinking concepts, although with very different degrees of specificity. This invites reflection on a paradox, since the regulations are moving toward work with evidence while the textbooks that reach the classroom continue to treat the document as an ornament to the narrative.

In the Chilean classroom, Minte-Münzenmayer & Ibagón-Martín (2017) analyzed the official curriculum, several textbooks and the transcripts of two months of lessons by nine teachers in Chillán, and found that critical thinking appears in the official documents but hardly appears in the textbooks or in practice, because teachers prioritize covering all the content of the program. More recently, Torres & Muñoz-Labraña (2024) observed eleven lessons by three first-year secondary teachers on the occupation of La Araucanía and noted that the teachers contextualize the period but do not lead students to formulate reasoned ethical judgments about past actions. Table 2 brings together the comparison for this group.

Table 2. *Comparison of studies on textbooks, curricula and teaching practice*.

Study	Country	Material or sample	Finding on sources
Valle-Taiman (2011)	Peru	Four textbooks for the 3rd and 4th years of secondary school	None defines the source or proposes evaluating its reliability
Minte-Münzenmayer & Ibagón-Martín (2017)	Chile	Curriculum, textbooks and lessons by nine teachers	Critical thinking is declared but not practiced
Martínez-Hita et al. (2022)	Ten countries	Official curricula	Most incorporate historical thinking with uneven specificity
Moreno-Vera et al. (2023)	Spain	Baccalaureate assessment criteria 2014 and 2022	Greater presence and cognitive level in the 2022 curriculum
Sáez-Rosenkranz & Gámez-Ceruelo (2024)	Latin America and Spain	169 works (1989-2023)	Ecuador contributes 2.37%; procedural approaches predominate
Torres & Muñoz-Labraña (2024)	Chile	Eleven lessons by three teachers	The period is contextualized but ethical judgment is not reached
Nasimba-Mera & Fraga-Luque (2025)	Ecuador	121 activities in the 1st-year BGU textbook (2020)	Only 5.0% use sources; 62% are short questions

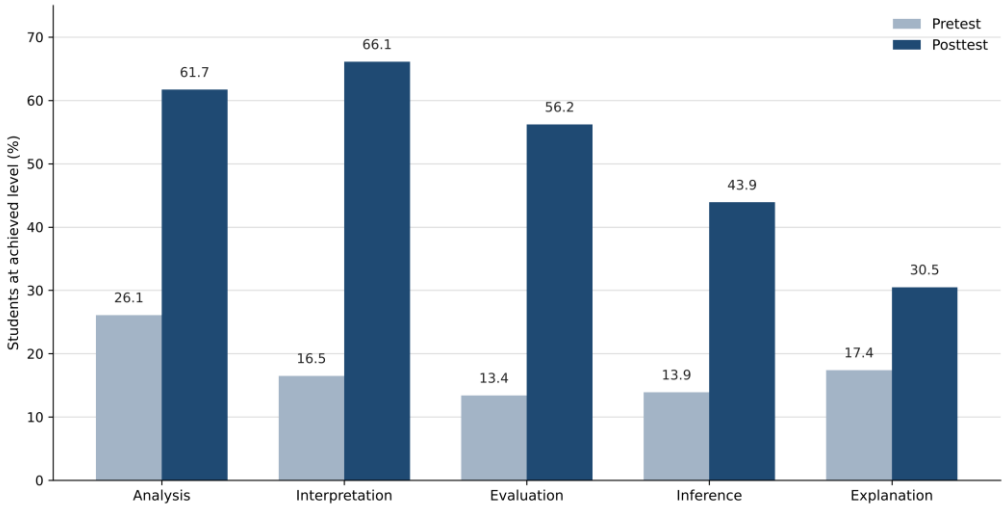
Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

What students show when they work with sources

Second, within the group of studies with Spanish-speaking students, the study closest to the object of this article is that of Cevallos-Torres & Mora-Pérez (2022), who worked with 46 third-year BGU students at the Unidad Educativa San Alfonso in Ambato during the 2021-2022 school year. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design and the Contextualized Critical Thinking Assessment instrument, the authors paired each dimension with a technique and a source, including testimonies in a round table, press articles in mind maps, articles in philosophical chairs and news videos in essays, and obtained significant improvements in all five dimensions, with p = .000 in analysis, interpretation, evaluation and inference and p = .011 in explanation.

When the percentages of students who reached the achieved level on each item are recalculated, Figure 2 shows that interpretation rose from an average of 16.5% to 66.1% and evaluation from 13.4% to 56.2%, while explanation advanced less, from 17.4% to 30.5%, which suggests that arguing in writing on the basis of sources takes more time than recognizing or assessing them. It should be noted that the study had no control group and that each activity lasted about a week, which is why its results should be read as an indication and not as conclusive proof.

Figure 2. *3rd-year BGU students at the achieved level by critical thinking dimension, before and after the intervention with sources*.



Note: developed in-house from the item percentages reported by Cevallos-Torres & Mora-Pérez (2022); each bar is the average of the items in the dimension.

In Spain, Rivero-Gracia et al. (2023) administered a questionnaire to 231 secondary and baccalaureate students from three schools in Zaragoza to examine how they judge the reliability of sources, and found limited levels of understanding and critical thinking that were very similar between the two stages, so that the expected progression between secondary school and baccalaureate was not confirmed. Likewise, Sánchez-Fuster & Rodríguez-Pérez (2025) surveyed 486 university students in Murcia about their time in the baccalaureate and recorded that work with primary sources, historical empathy and the ethical dimension still have little relevance in the classroom, even though the curriculum requires them.

As regards narrative, Sáiz-Serrano & López-Facal (2015) asked 85 second-year baccalaureate students from four public high schools in Valencia and 32 pre-service teachers to write a synthesis of the history of twentieth-century Spain, and found that about 52% of the baccalaureate students did not use any second-order concept, while critical narratives reached only 12% among them compared with 34% among the pre-service teachers. Likewise, Acosta-Torres (2020) documented an intervention in Mexico on the Mexican Revolution in upper secondary school based on primary sources and concluded that their use encourages the development of historical thinking, although without reporting quantitative measurements.

A similar situation is observed in teacher education, since Chávez-Preisler (2024) analyzed the synthesis lessons planned by 69 pre-service history teachers from five Chilean universities and found that 72% incorporated sources, but only 5.9% applied contextualization, analysis and corroboration together, while 26% used documents only to extract explicit information. This helps explain why sources reach the classroom as repositories of data, since those who teach them have not internalized the procedures that turn them into evidence either.

What interventions from the English-speaking world teach

On the other hand, the third group provides the most solid experimental evidence, and its starting point is the Reading Like a Historian program, whose implementation in five public high schools in San Francisco was evaluated by Reisman (2012) over six months, with improvements over the comparison groups in historical thinking, factual knowledge and reading comprehension. In turn, Nokes et al. (2007) showed that explicitly teaching the heuristics of sourcing, contextualization and corroboration to high school students leads to more frequent use of these strategies than simply reading multiple texts, which indicates that heuristics must be taught and are not acquired through exposure. In the same direction, Monte-Sano (2010) compared the writing of high school students in two U.S. history classrooms and showed that essays became more historical in nature when the teacher explicitly taught students to support claims with evidence and to place them in context.

Similarly, De La Paz et al. (2017) implemented an 18-day curriculum integrating document reading and argumentative writing over a school year, and obtained effect sizes of 0.45 in historical writing and 0.32 in overall text quality among struggling readers. Nevertheless, van Boxtel & van Drie (2012) warn, based on an experiment with 114 Dutch students, that the contextualization of images and documents depends on a well-connected network of historical knowledge, so that analysis prompts yield little if students have not first mastered the key concepts and events of the period.

Finally, the digital environment adds a new demand, since Wineburg & McGrew (2019) compared the way historians, university students and professional fact-checkers evaluated websites, and found that the fact-checkers soon left the page to check it against other sources, a practice they called lateral reading, which is relevant for students who today access digitized historical documents without mediation. Table 3 summarizes the comparison of the studies with students and the interventions.

Table 3. *Comparison of studies with students and interventions with sources*.

Study	Country	Sample and design	Result
Nokes et al. (2007)	United States	Secondary; explicit teaching of heuristics	Greater use of sourcing, context and corroboration
Monte-Sano (2010)	United States	Writing in two secondary classrooms	Explicit teaching of evidence improves the essay
Reisman (2012)	United States	Five public schools; six months	Improvements in historical thinking, knowledge and reading
van Boxtel & van Drie (2012)	Netherlands	18 students and an experiment with 114	Contextualization depends on prior knowledge
Sáiz-Serrano & López-Facal (2015)	Spain	85 baccalaureate students and 32 pre-service teachers	52% of baccalaureate students without second-order concepts
De La Paz et al. (2017)	United States	18-day curriculum over one year	Effect of 0.45 in historical writing
Wineburg & McGrew (2019)	United States	Historians, students and fact-checkers	Lateral reading distinguishes experts
Acosta-Torres (2020)	Mexico	Upper secondary; Mexican Revolution	Sources encourage historical thinking
Cevallos-Torres & Mora-Pérez (2022)	Ecuador	46 3rd-year BGU students; pretest and posttest	Significant improvements in all five dimensions
Chávez-Preisler (2024)	Chile	69 pre-service teachers from five universities	72% use sources; 5.9% contextualize, analyze and corroborate
Rivero-Gracia et al. (2023)	Spain	231 secondary and baccalaureate students	Limited levels and no progression between stages
Sánchez-Fuster & Rodríguez-Pérez (2025)	Spain	486 university students on their baccalaureate	Little relevance of work with primary sources

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Primary sources and critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU

Thus, the comparison between groups makes it possible to establish correspondences between the operations historians perform with documents and the dimensions of critical thinking measured by the instruments used in Ecuador, as shown in Table 4, where sourcing is linked to evaluation, contextualization to interpretation, corroboration to inference and argumentation to explanation. This indicates that work with sources is not a complementary activity in the history class, since it is the path through which critical thinking skills find concrete content on which to be exercised.

Table 4. *Correspondence between operations with sources and dimensions of critical thinking*.

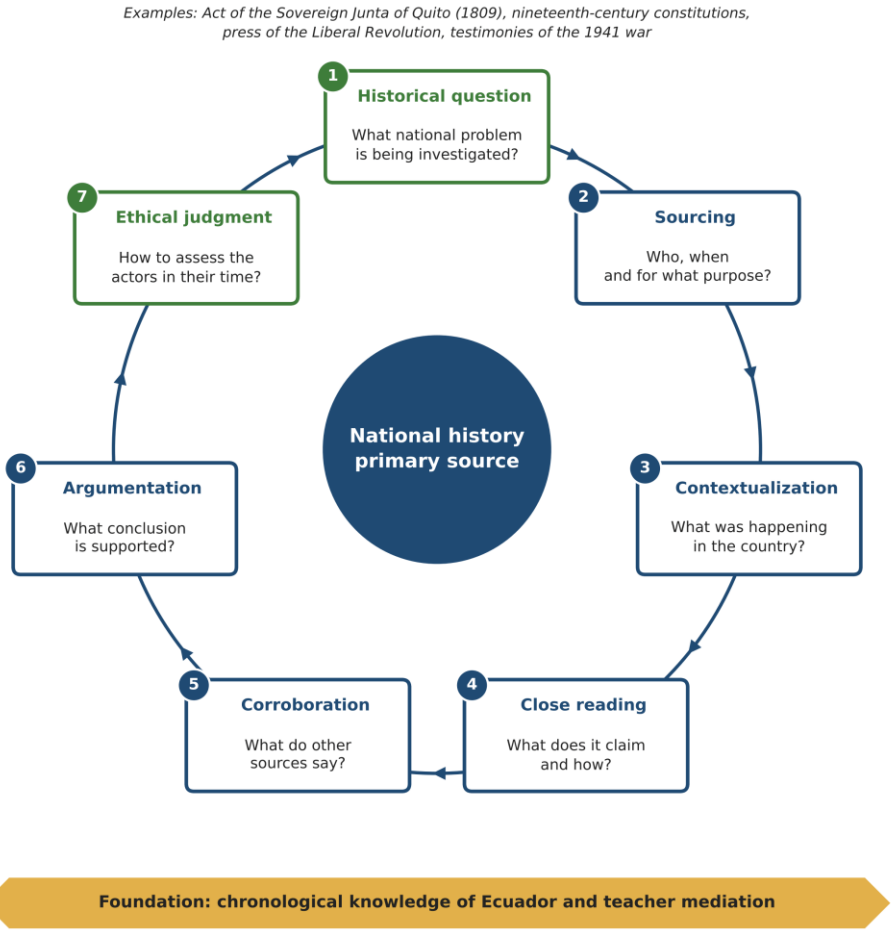
Operation with the source	Guiding question for 3rd-year BGU	Critical thinking dimension	Support in the corpus
Sourcing	Who produced the document, when and for what purpose?	Evaluation	Wineburg (1991); Nokes et al. (2007)
Contextualization	What was happening in the country when it was written?	Interpretation	van Boxtel & van Drie (2012); Reisman (2012)
Close reading	What does the author claim and which words reveal their stance?	Analysis	Reisman (2012); Cevallos-Torres & Mora-Pérez (2022)
Corroboration	What do other sources say about the same event?	Inference	Wineburg (1991); Wineburg & McGrew (2019)
Argumentation	What conclusion can be defended with the evidence?	Explanation	De La Paz et al. (2017); Sáiz-Serrano & López-Facal (2015)
Ethical judgment	How should the actors' decisions be assessed in light of their time?	Self-regulation	Seixas (2017); Torres & Muñoz-Labraña (2024)

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

On this basis, the authors propose, as an inference, a sequence for national history in 3rd-year BGU that starts from a historical question, moves through reading for provenance, context and

contrast between documents, and culminates in an argumentative text that students defend before their peers, as represented in Figure 3. To this end, the 1809 Act of the Sovereign Junta of Quito, the nineteenth-century constitutions, the press of the Liberal Revolution or testimonies about the 1941 war provide materials in which students can ask who spoke, for whom and with what interests, and contrast those voices with those of school textbooks.

Figure 3. *Teaching sequence with primary sources of national history for 3rd-year BGU.*



Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Another aspect that should be examined is prior knowledge, since the evidence from van Boxtel & van Drie (2012) indicates that contextualization fails when students lack a chronological framework, hence the proposed sequence does not replace the teacher's explanation but presupposes it. In the same vein, the risk detected by Torres & Muñoz-Labraña (2024) in Chile, where analysis stops before ethical judgment, makes it necessary to set aside an explicit moment to assess the decisions of past actors according to their context, without anachronism and without giving up the moral question.

Consequently, the proposal requires revising BGU textbooks so that sources are no longer illustrative boxes and become the object of questions about provenance, context and contrast, as the results of Nasimba-Mera & Fraga-Luque (2025) suggest, and it also requires teachers to have time to sustain the sequence over several weeks, a condition that Cevallos-Torres & Mora-Pérez (2022) met by devoting one week to each dimension. In this regard, Sáez-Rosenkranz & Gámez-Ceruelo (2024) finally recall that no primary source is neutral, so that teaching students to read them is also teaching them to recognize from where the country's history is narrated.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of analyzing primary sources in the teaching of national history and critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU students was achieved through the comparison of 25 sources covering textbooks, curricula, studies with students and classroom interventions in Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Mexico, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States. In light of the above, the textbooks and practices analyzed tend to use the document as an illustration of the narrative, while recent curricula and experimental interventions treat it as evidence to be questioned.

The comparison shows that interventions with sources improve the skills of analysis, interpretation and evaluation, as occurred with the 46 third-year BGU students in Ambato, but that written explanation and ethical judgment advance more slowly and require sustained support. This indicates that critical thinking in 3rd-year BGU depends on turning each national source into a problem of provenance, context and corroboration, and on supporting this work with solid chronological knowledge.

Therefore, educational institutions and the Ministry of Education are advised to revise the activities in BGU History textbooks, to incorporate the country's documentary archives in digital format and to train teachers in historical reading heuristics. Likewise, a challenge for future research is to measure, with comparison groups and in different regions of Ecuador, the effect of sequences with primary sources on students' argumentative writing at the end of upper secondary school.

FINANCING

Non-monetary.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any individuals or institutions related to this research.

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