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Relevance of the prioritized curriculum and competencies in intercultural bilingual contexts of Ecuador

Pertinencia del currículo priorizado y competencias en contextos interculturales bilingües del Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The prioritized curriculum issued by Ecuador's Ministry of Education in 2021 set communication, mathematical, digital and socio-emotional competencies for the whole country, since its application in the intercultural bilingual system requires verifying whether it responds to the diversity of the nationalities. The study therefore aimed to analyze the relevance of the prioritized curriculum in the face of cultural diversity and the competencies it demands in intercultural bilingual contexts of Ecuador. A systematic review following PRISMA 2020 was carried out, with 26 included studies. The results showed that curricular contextualization exists in the regulations, but Kichwa standardization, weak teacher training and the digital divide limit its relevance. It was concluded that the prioritized curriculum will be relevant if it integrates the linguistic, epistemic, community and competency dimensions.

Descriptors: curriculum; intercultural education; bilingual education; indigenous peoples; competencies. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El currículo priorizado que el Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador expidió en 2021 fijó competencias comunicacionales, matemáticas, digitales y socioemocionales para todo el país, por cuanto su aplicación en el sistema intercultural bilingüe exige verificar si responde a la diversidad de las nacionalidades. Es así que el estudio se planteó como objetivo analizar la pertinencia del currículo priorizado ante la diversidad cultural y las competencias que demanda en contextos interculturales bilingües del Ecuador. En este sentido se empleó una revisión sistemática según PRISMA 2020, con 26 estudios incluidos. Entre los resultados se obtuvo que la contextualización curricular existe en la norma, pero la estandarización del kichwa, la débil formación docente y la brecha digital limitan su pertinencia. Entre las conclusiones se estableció que el currículo priorizado será pertinente si integra las dimensiones lingüística, epistémica, comunitaria y competencial.

Descriptores: currículo; educación intercultural; educación bilingüe; pueblos indígenas; competencias. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

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Research Articles Section

INTRODUCTION

When the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (2008) defined the country as an intercultural and plurinational State in Article 1, recognized Kichwa and Shuar in Article 2 as official languages of intercultural relations and obliged the State, in Article 347, paragraph 9, to guarantee an intercultural bilingual education system in which the language of each nationality is the main language of education and Spanish the language of intercultural relations, it set a curricular horizon that does not admit a single curriculum alien to diversity. In line with this mandate, Vernimmen Aguirre (2019) recalls that the Intercultural Bilingual Education System was institutionalized in 1988 after decades of struggle by Indigenous movements, and warns that, despite the recognition of the rights of the thirteen nationalities, practice has endorsed an education that is more multicultural than intercultural.

For its part, the 2020 health emergency led the Ministry of Education (2021) to issue a prioritized curriculum with an emphasis on communication, mathematical, digital and socio-emotional competencies, designed to reduce content and sustain learning during remote education. However, Asanov et al. (2021) surveyed 1500 upper secondary students during the quarantine and found that three out of four took part in online or television-based learning, but that the most disadvantaged groups did less schoolwork and that 16% showed depressive symptoms, so that curricular prioritization operated on very unequal conditions.

At the conceptual level, the cultural relevance of the curriculum has a solid tradition, since Ladson-Billings (1995) formulated culturally relevant pedagogy on the basis of three criteria, academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness, and Gay (2002) proposed culturally responsive teaching that uses the experiences and perspectives of diverse students as a pathway to learning. Likewise, Hornberger (2000) analyzed the policies of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia and described the ideological paradox of transforming a standardizing education into a diversifying one, a tension that reappears every time a national curriculum reaches the schools of the nationalities.

But how relevant is a prioritized curriculum, designed for the whole country, when it is applied in schools where the main language of instruction should be Kichwa, Shuar or another original language, and what competencies does it demand of students and teachers in these contexts? Based on the above, the research aims to analyze the relevance of the prioritized curriculum in the face of cultural diversity and the competencies it demands in intercultural bilingual contexts of Ecuador.

METHOD

The methodology used is qualitative, with a systematic literature review design conducted according to the PRISMA 2020 statement, which made it possible to identify, screen, appraise and integrate, in an explicit and reproducible way, studies on the prioritized curriculum, intercultural bilingual education and intercultural competencies. Accordingly, the question was formulated using the PICo strategy, with the population of students and teachers in intercultural bilingual contexts, the phenomenon of interest of curricular relevance and competencies, and the Ecuadorian and Latin American context, whose elements are detailed in Table 1.

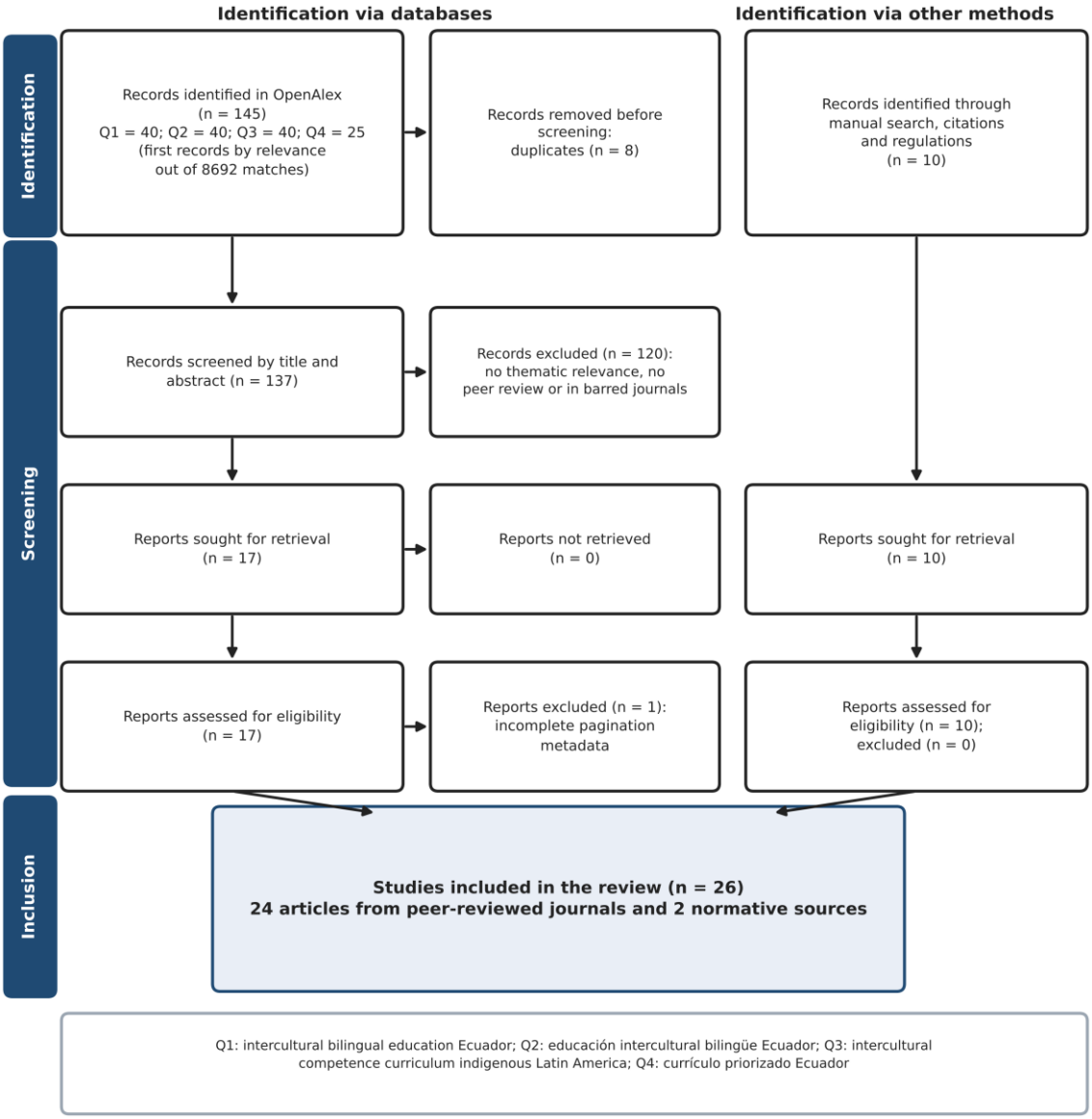
Table 1. *Systematic review protocol*.

Element	Description
Design	Systematic literature review according to PRISMA 2020; narrative and thematic synthesis
Question (PICo)	Population: students and teachers in intercultural bilingual contexts; phenomenon of interest: relevance of the prioritized curriculum and competencies; context: Ecuador and Latin America
Database and queries	OpenAlex. Q1: intercultural bilingual education Ecuador; Q2: educación intercultural bilingüe Ecuador; Q3: intercultural competence curriculum indigenous Latin America; Q4: currículo priorizado Ecuador
Filters	Journal articles; 1995-2026 (Q1 to Q3 from 2000; Q4 from 2020); Spanish and English
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed studies with a DOI or verifiable record on curriculum, intercultural bilingual education, original languages or intercultural competencies; current Ecuadorian regulations
Exclusion criteria	Duplicates, theses, press, non-peer-reviewed reports, journals barred by the protocol and records with incomplete metadata
Verification	Check of each reference against Crossref (authorship, journal, volume, issue, pages and DOI)
Categories	Foundations (n = 5); language policy and IBE (n = 11); prioritized curriculum and pandemic (n = 5); community voices, higher education and competencies (n = 5)

Note: developed in-house.

As for the search, the open bibliographic database OpenAlex was consulted through four queries in Spanish and English, which returned 8692 matches, of which the first records ranked by relevance were reviewed, 40 in each of the first three queries and 25 in the fourth, for a total of 145 records, to which 10 sources identified through manual searching, citation tracking and official regulations were added. Subsequently, 8 duplicates were removed, 137 records were screened by title and abstract, 120 were excluded for lack of thematic relevance, absence of peer review or publication in journals barred by the protocol, and 17 full reports were assessed, of which one was excluded for incomplete pagination metadata, as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection*.



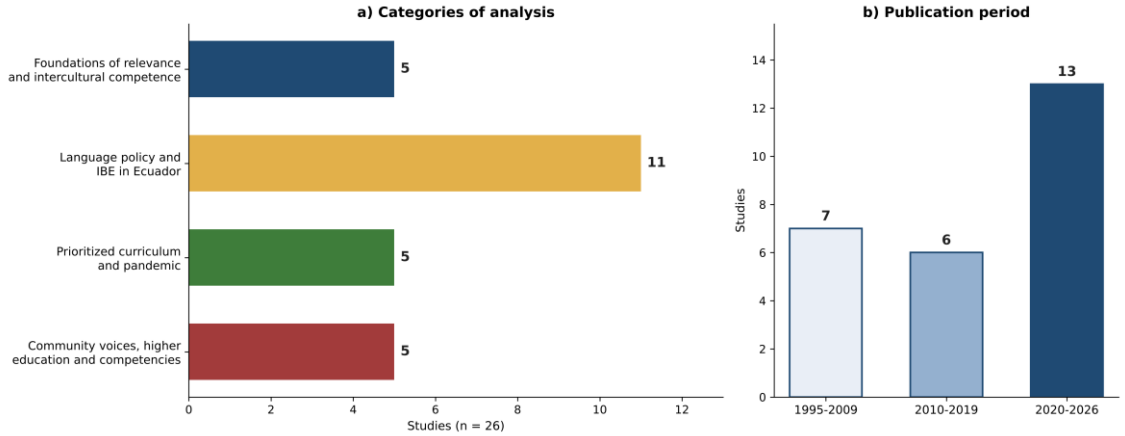
Note: developed in-house according to the PRISMA 2020 statement.

Regarding verification, each included reference was checked against Crossref records for authorship, journal, volume, issue, pages and DOI, and the country, context, design, population and main finding were extracted from each study. Finally, the synthesis was narrative and thematic, with four categories of analysis, and since this is a documentary study, no work was carried out with people or personal data.

RESULTS

Overall, the corpus comprised 26 studies, of which 24 are articles in peer-reviewed journals and two are normative sources, the 2008 Constitution and the 2021 prioritized curriculum, distributed across four categories of analysis, with a predominance of language policy and intercultural bilingual education in Ecuador, which brings together 11 studies, and with half of the sources published between 2020 and 2026, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Composition of the corpus by category of analysis and publication period*.



Note: developed in-house.

Foundations of cultural relevance and intercultural competence

First, Deardorff (2006) consulted 23 intercultural specialists using the Delphi method and surveyed administrators at 24 higher education institutions, and obtained a model in which attitudes of respect, openness and curiosity underpin knowledge and skills, from which internal outcomes, such as empathy and flexibility, and external outcomes, such as effective and appropriate communication, derive. For her part, Hornberger (2009) set out ten certainties of multilingual education grounded in Indigenous experience, among them that the first language is the foundation of learning and that national policies open ideological and implementational spaces that teachers can occupy.

In the Latin American sphere, Quintriqueo Millán et al. (2014) argue that formal schooling was conceived as a tool of nation-states to prolong coloniality, and that teacher education must build a dialogue between subjects of different cultures to counter monoculturalism, racism and discrimination. Both approaches agree that relevance is not reduced to adding cultural content, but requires transforming the relationship among knowledge, languages and subjects in the classroom.

Intercultural bilingual education between recognition and standardization

Second, Oviedo and Wildemeersch (2008) explain that Ecuador's thirteen nationalities follow the Model of the Intercultural Bilingual Education System [MOSEIB] and that its curricular diversification seeks to relate content to the reality of the Kichwa nationality, its communal environment, its rituals and its agricultural calendar. However, Limerick's series of ethnographic studies shows the tensions of this diversification, since the author documented how different Kichwa alphabets circulate in reading materials and create difficulties for readers, to the point that the shape of a single letter arouses emotions (Limerick, 2018), and how school textbooks are difficult to read even for the teachers for whom they are intended (Limerick & Hornberger, 2019).

Likewise, Limerick (2020a) analyzed the Kichwa proficiency exam required to enter intercultural bilingual teaching and warned that it reveals standardizing ideologies that classify knowledge by class, race and urban origin, although almost all actors in the system, including the examiners, expressed reservations. Along the same lines, Limerick (2020b) observed that system officials open official events with greetings in standardized Kichwa and then switch to Spanish, a gesture that marks the State as intercultural but makes Kichwa commensurable with Spanish, while Limerick (2023a) compared two schools and showed that their ways of teaching Kichwa promote or reject state standardization and the citizenships it privileges.

Similarly, Limerick (2023b) carried out two years of ethnography in the national offices of the system and concluded that Kichwa is more visible than ever, although state planning transforms it, while Tingo Proaño (2026) identifies three persistent challenges of intercultural bilingual

education, educational autonomy, teacher training and the reformulation of the intercultural curriculum, and warns that inclusion discourses lack a critical foundation based on rights and social justice. Table 2 thus summarizes the empirical studies that support these findings.

Table 2. *Included empirical studies on intercultural bilingual education and curriculum in Ecuador*.

Study	Context and design	Main finding
Oviedo & Wildemeersch (2008)	MOSEIB; curricular analysis	Diversification linked to the Kichwa communal environment, rituals and agricultural calendar
Katz & Chumpi Nantip (2014)	Southern Amazon; interviews with 7 Shuar mothers	IBE must be decolonized from missionary tutelage
Krainer et al. (2017)	Amawtay Wasi; case study	Interculturality is still under construction and requires political will
Limerick (2018)	Kichwa; history and ethnography	Competing alphabets hinder reading
Limerick & Hornberger (2019)	Peru and Ecuador; school textbooks	Textbooks are difficult even for teachers
Limerick (2020a)	Kichwa exam for entry into teaching	Standardizing ideologies classify knowledge
Asanov et al. (2021)	Survey of 1500 students	Three out of four in remote learning; 16% with depression
Posso Pacheco et al. (2022)	Documentary review	Contextualization brings the curriculum closer to the community
Veintie et al. (2022)	Amazon; Indigenous upper secondary education	No online access; self-study guides viable
Arias-Gutierrez & Minoia (2023)	Universidad Estatal Amazónica	Approaches that deny intercultural education persist
Limerick (2023a)	Two Kichwa schools; comparison	Ways of teaching Kichwa accept or reject standardization
Lima-Yarpaz et al. (2025)	Teachers from 22 institutions in Quito	High contextualization; medium digital integration

Note: developed in-house from the studies cited.

The prioritized curriculum and its contextualization during the pandemic

Accordingly, Posso Pacheco et al. (2022) point out that, five years after the current national curriculum was issued, the Ministry of Education regulated curricular contextualization through a ministerial agreement, and conclude that it makes it possible to bring the prioritized curriculum closer to the institutional reality as an open and flexible instrument, although the responsibility for achieving this falls on the teacher. For their part, Lima-Yarpaz et al. (2025) surveyed teachers from 22 institutions in Quito during the 2023-2024 school year and found a high level of contextualization and promotion of socio-emotional competencies, but only a medium level of integration of digital competencies and limited use of the textbook provided by the Ministry.

In the territories of the nationalities, conditions were more adverse, since Veintie et al. (2022) studied the access of Amazonian Indigenous youth to upper secondary education during the pandemic and found that most students and teachers lacked access to online education, that self-study guides were the possible way to continue and that the State's response was weak compared with community resilience. This indicates that the emphasis of the prioritized curriculum on digital competencies, reasonable in urban contexts, comes up against a divide in intercultural bilingual schools that Asanov et al. (2021) had already documented for the most disadvantaged groups.

Community voices, higher education and intercultural competencies

Thus, Katz and Chumpi Nantip (2014) interviewed, in December 2011, seven Shuar mothers of children attending an intercultural bilingual school in the southern Amazon and, contrary to the idea that families prefer Spanish because they consider the system inferior, found that their concern was different, since intercultural bilingual education had been too closely tied to the Salesian missions and needed to be decolonized to reflect Shuar educational values and practices.

In higher education, Krainer et al. (2017) analyzed the Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University of

Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples and concluded that, beyond state discourse, interculturality remains a concept under construction that requires critical thinking and political will, while Arias-Gutierrez and Minoia (2023) studied the Universidad Estatal Amazónica and found the persistence of approaches that deny the validity of intercultural education alongside decolonial spaces claimed by the students themselves. Likewise, Martínez-Murillo (2025) proposes developing intercultural communicative competencies through telecollaboration programs, and Maldonado-Marín et al. (2025) critically examine the gap between curriculum and teaching practice in English teaching in Ecuador, a contribution that recalls that the intercultural bilingual classroom is, in many cases, trilingual.

DISCUSSION

This invites reflection on a paradox that runs through the corpus, since the prioritized curriculum was created to simplify and make things more flexible, and the contextualization regulated by the Ministry of Education (Posso Pacheco et al., 2022) opens a margin for adaptation, but that margin is exercised in a system where linguistic standardization, entrance exams and school textbooks push in the opposite direction (Limerick, 2018, 2020a). This indicates that relevance depends not only on the flexibility of the curriculum document, but on who carries out contextualization and with what resources, an aspect that confirms the ideological paradox described by Hornberger (2000) two decades earlier.

Another aspect that should be examined is the reading of competencies, since the four competencies of the prioritized curriculum can be read through Deardorff's (2006) model as intercultural competencies, provided that communication competence includes the language of the nationality, digital competence is adapted to the self-study guides that did work in the Amazon (Veintie et al., 2022) and socio-emotional competence incorporates the community values claimed by the Shuar mothers (Katz & Chumpi Nantip, 2014). Table 3 thus contrasts the requirements of the prioritized curriculum with those of the intercultural bilingual model.

Table 3. *Requirements of the prioritized curriculum and of the intercultural bilingual model*.

Dimension	Prioritized curriculum (2021)	Intercultural bilingual requirement
Language	Communication competence centered on Spanish	Language of the nationality as the main language and Spanish as the language of relations (Constitution, Art. 347.9)
Knowledge	Reduced and prioritized national content	Dialogue of knowledges and ancestral knowledge (Krainer et al., 2017)
School time	National calendar	Agricultural and ritual calendar of the community (Oviedo & Wildemeersch, 2008)
Digital competence	Integration of digital resources	Self-study guides where there is no connectivity (Veintie et al., 2022)
Teacher	Contextualizes the curriculum (Posso Pacheco et al., 2022)	Command of the language without standardizing biases (Limerick, 2020a)

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

In light of the above, the authors propose, as an inference, a relevance model with four dimensions, linguistic, epistemic, community and competency, articulated around a contextualized prioritized curriculum and sustained by an intercultural bilingual teacher trained and assessed without standardizing biases, as represented in Figure 3. Hence an intrinsic challenge for teacher education institutions, since the challenges of autonomy, training and curricular reformulation identified by Tingo Proaño (2026) will not be solved with more content, but with teachers capable of translating the national curriculum into the language, calendar and knowledge of each community.

Consequently, the review has limitations that should be considered, since the search was carried out in a single bibliographic database, the first records by relevance of each query were reviewed and empirical evidence on the prioritized curriculum in intercultural bilingual schools is still scarce, so that a good part of the conclusions rests on studies on the intercultural bilingual system in general.

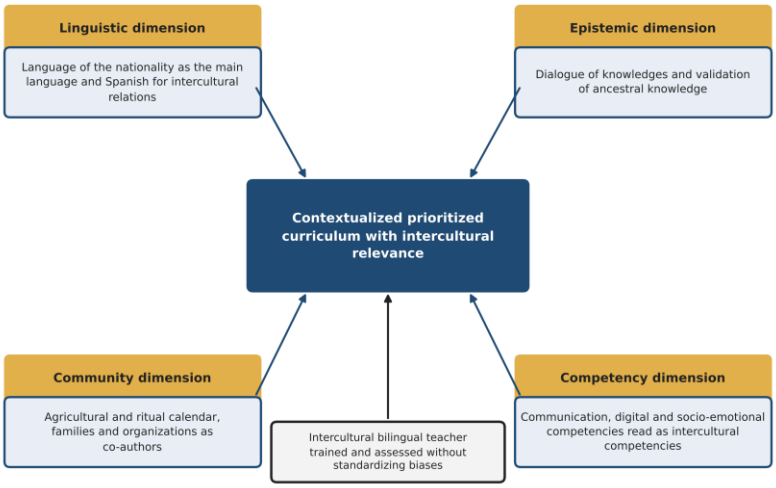


Figure 3. *Intercultural relevance model of the prioritized curriculum*. **Note:** developed in-house; authors' inference from the corpus reviewed.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of analyzing the relevance of the prioritized curriculum in the face of cultural diversity and the competencies it demands in intercultural bilingual contexts of Ecuador was achieved through a systematic review of 26 studies, which makes it possible to state that curricular contextualization exists in the regulations, but that its relevance is limited by the standardization of Kichwa in exams, official greetings and school textbooks, by weak teacher training and by the digital divide that the pandemic made visible in the territories of the nationalities.

Likewise, it is concluded that the communication, mathematical, digital and socio-emotional competencies of the prioritized curriculum can become intercultural competencies if they are read from the language of each nationality, community knowledge and the participation of families, so that the curriculum will be relevant to the extent that it integrates the linguistic, epistemic, community and competency dimensions. Therefore, the Secretariat of the Intercultural Bilingual Education System and teacher education universities are advised to assess, together with the communities, the application of the prioritized curriculum in intercultural bilingual schools and to strengthen training in original languages and curricular contextualization.

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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