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RECEIVED 27 June 2025

ACCEPTED 19 August 2025

PUBLISHED 05 September 2025

CITATION

Balán L (2025) Observations and
recommendations regarding ethnoeducation
in Colombia. *Front. Educ.* 10:1654820.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1654820

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Observations and recommendations regarding ethnoeducation in Colombia

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This policy brief examines the challenges and opportunities of ethnoeducation in Colombia, highlighting persistent structural inequalities affecting Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Drawing on critical interculturality, the analysis reveals how current policies often essentialize ethnicity, reproduce educational segregation, and limit genuine dialogue. While acknowledging advances in access and cultural affirmation, the brief critiques the separation of curricula and the exclusion of the dominant society from intercultural education. It proposes systemic reform based on intercultural learning for all, teacher training in minoritized knowledges, community-based curriculum design, and better data systems. Emphasis is placed on decolonizing education to dismantle racial hierarchies and foster mutual learning. The brief concludes with a phased roadmap for reform, recognizing political resistance while positioning interculturality as a shared national responsibility.

KEYWORDS

ethnoeducation, critical interculturality, educational inequality, decolonizing education, educational policy reform, structural racism, intercultural curriculum

Problem presentation and justification of its relevance

Throughout Latin America, persistent gaps exist between dominant and ethnic populations in schooling levels, achievement of basic competencies, secondary completion, and higher education access. In Colombia, for example, in 2020 there was a 17.1-point gap in upper secondary completion between indigenous and non-indigenous/non-Afro-descendant populations, a 31.9-point gap in higher education enrollment, and significant disparities in basic reading and math skills (see [Figures 1–3](#)). These inequalities are compounded by factors like rural residence, armed conflict, migration, socioeconomic status, and gender, which intersect to further affect educational outcomes for ethnic populations (see [CEPAL, 2016](#); [Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura, 2017](#)).

This situation is particularly concerning given that 13.7% of Colombia's population identifies as belonging to ethnic communities—Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, Palenquero, Romani, and Indigenous peoples—for whom access to quality education is essential for the advancement of their living conditions. Without inclusive, effective policies that ensure access to quality and higher education, these communities face ongoing rights violations rooted in colonial histories. While constitutional reforms and ethnoeducation policies since the 1980s—driven by indigenous and Afro-descendant movements—have recognized cultural and linguistic diversity, gaps remain that hinder equity and full development for these groups.

Despite significant advances in terms of access and recognition fostered by ethnoeducation, critical issues have been pointed out concerning their implementation. These include matters such as a mistaken understanding of the ethnic population as essentially rural; the persistence of everyday racism even within educational institutions (Fontana, 2018); interpretations of interculturality not as a critical exercise addressing power inequalities, but merely as distant tolerance; the ongoing undervaluation of the knowledge, ways of life, and values of communities compared to dominant ideas of reason and progress (Corbetta, 2021); the folklorization of ethnic communities from a functional state interculturality (Corbetta, 2021)—that is, a tolerant interculturality without genuine revaluation or horizontal dialogue with the ethnic other; limited participation of communities in policy design; conflicts arising from different schooling preferences within the same ethnic community and others coexisting in the same territory (Fontana, 2018); and others that show ethnoeducation is still thought of as a service solely for ethnic communities, not affecting the dominant society.

Despite the significant progress that culturally relevant education has brought to ethnicized populations—such as affirming their right to self-determination regarding what knowledge matters, choosing their teachers, and transmitting their own values, epistemologies, and ontologies—some authors argue that its current implementation results in a form of *educational apartheid* [Chiodi cited in Cárdenas Muñoz in Corbetta (2021)]. This term refers to the systemic separation of educational pathways based on ethnicity, where students from the dominant society are provided with knowledge and skills that prepare them for competitiveness in the global labor market and enable upward social mobility, while ethnicized students are often offered an education focused on preserving traditional practices and trades. Although culturally valuable, this curriculum is frequently disconnected from the demands and opportunities of the broader economy. As such, this separation reinforces historical patterns of exclusion and racial hierarchy, reproducing the logic of subjugation established since the colonial “concealment of America” (Dussel, 1992), though now under a seemingly respectful and politically correct guise.

Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive ethnic education for all students subtly reflects the persistent notion of the nation as a singular entity—rooted in nineteenth-century ideals—and still imagined as white, Christian, and modern. This vision positions the state as merely providing services to ethnicized communities rather than meaningfully integrating with them. This has hindered true mutual understanding and intercultural enrichment. The political project of Gustavo Petro’s government, with its emphasis on interculturality, rural education, expansion of free university coverage, focus on empowering ethnic and peasant communities, and interest in environmental protection, represents a timely opportunity to question and improve what has been achieved so far regarding so-called ethnoeducation.

Methods

This policy brief draws on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including official reports from Colombia’s Ministry of

Education, international policy documents (e.g., UNESCO, CEPAL, UNICEF), and recent academic literature on ethnoeducation and interculturality in Latin America. The analysis was complemented by a critical policy review focused on the gaps between legal frameworks and implementation practices. Emphasis was placed on identifying structural patterns of exclusion, assessing the effectiveness of current ethnoeducational initiatives, and proposing actionable strategies rooted in critical interculturality. The findings were synthesized to generate evidence-based recommendations for systemic reform.

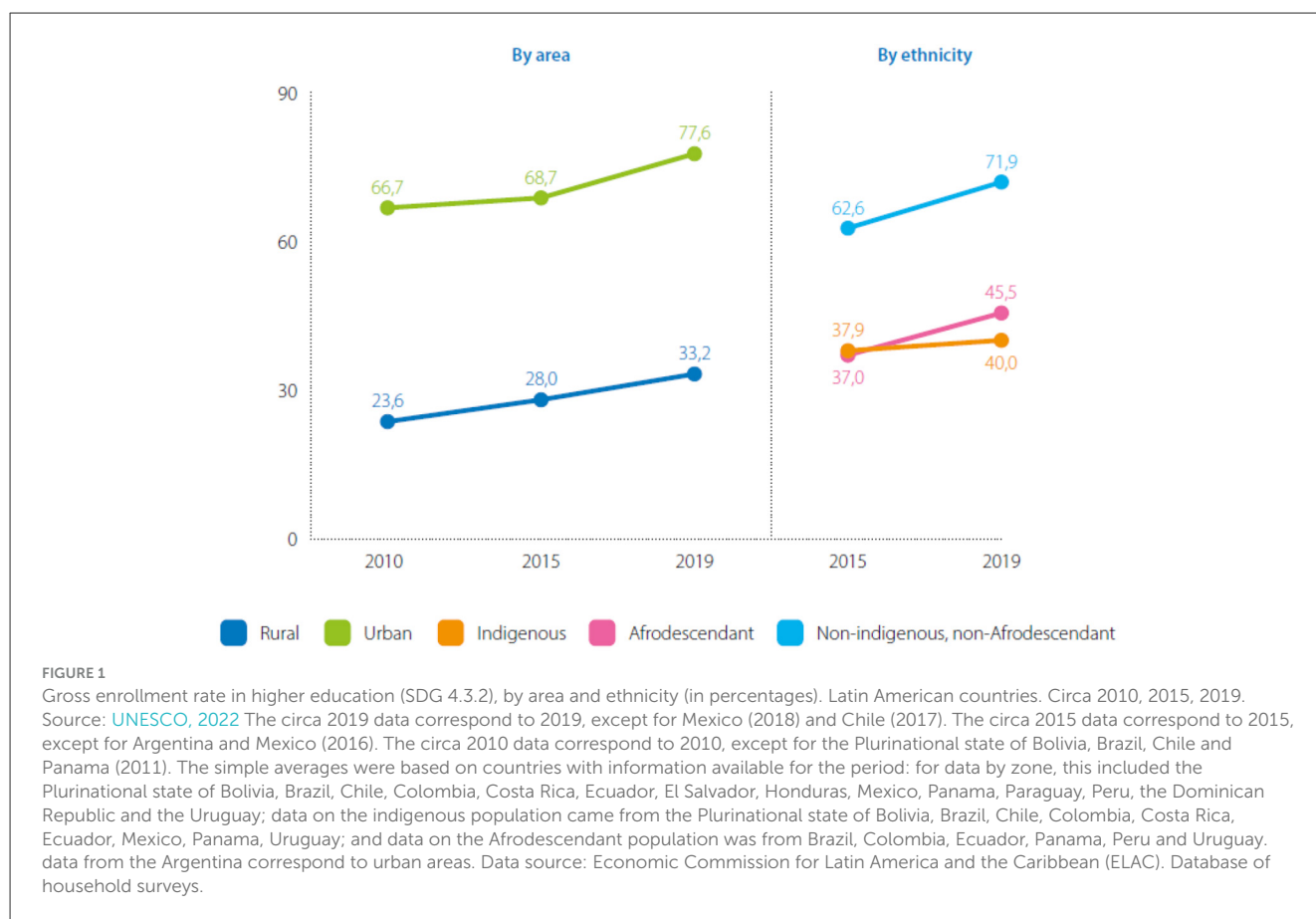
Analysis of the educational context regarding the implementation of ethnoeducation in Colombia

UNICEF (2020) and Corbetta (2021), and other researchers highlight the fragmented nature of existing data on the impact of ethnoeducation in Colombia. Regarding this, UNICEF mentions that “information on the educational conditions of indigenous and rural populations is scarce, scattered, and not used for policy decision-making at the national and local levels.” The 2020 management report from the Ministry of Education presents data related to the funding of certain activities but does not address the impacts of previous actions. It mentions funding for the maintenance of sixty nine ethnoeducational sites and thirty four NARP (Non-Formal Alternative Educational Programs), the delivery of two new ethnoeducational institutions, and the Ministry of Education’s support through the Methodological Accompaniment Route for Ethnic Groups to assist communities in the creation of their Community Educational Projects. It also states that the salaries of 1,514 ethnoeducators were updated.

Decree 317 of February 27, 2020 not only authorized the salary update of 1,514 ethnic educators across 33 Secretariats of Education, but also recognized new academic degrees obtained by these educators. This advancement is fundamental to fostering a more heterogeneous understanding of the construction of epistemologies from the Global South, as it validates diverse educational trajectories and contributes to strengthening situated knowledge.

Regarding teacher training, the report mentions the training of ethnoeducators through the “Todos a Aprender” (Everyone to Learn) program, the creation of three books for the recovery of ancestral narratives, knowledge, and languages through the “Territorios Narrados” (Narrated Territories) program, and some working sessions for validating quality measurement instruments in the Caribbean regions, La Guajira, Cauca, Risaralda, Guaviare, Amazonas, Caldas, Putumayo, Córdoba, and Bogotá. It also refers to 85% funding for postgraduate programs for ethnoeducators: 2 Afro educators were funded for specializations, two hundred and forty four Afro and eighty two indigenous educators for master’s degrees, and three Afro educators for doctorates, with some diplomas on interculturality also developed.

Additionally, it notes that 1,069 teaching advisors were trained (of whom fifty three were Afro- Colombian ethnoeducators and four indigenous ethnoeducators) in the promotion of socio-emotional and civic competencies, the exercise of human rights,



and the prevention and monitoring of situations affecting equal participation and discrimination, among others.

Regarding some key problems found:

- There persists in the implementation of policies an essentializing understanding of ethnic communities. They seem to be understood as autonomous, isolated, and cohesive entities. The truth is that it is politically complex—given the implications in terms of differential rights—to define today what it means to be indigenous, Afro-descendant, Raizal, Palenquero, Rom, or Romani people. Moreover, someone's identification with such an identity does not necessarily lead to monolithic choices, for example, regarding the type of education they want for their children. For instance, there are indigenous parents who want to send their children to traditional schools because poor implementation of ethnoeducation has perpetuated quality gaps. Additionally, the implementation of policies involved deciding which schools would adopt culturally relevant education, which created conflicts in communities that previously lived in harmony due to opposing views about preferences between traditional education vs. culturally relevant education, for example, in Cauca (Fontana, 2018). Thus, in localities where the school becomes ethnoeducational and autonomous, campesinos who do not identify as part of the indigenous community are forced to follow traditions that often do not represent them (Fontana, 2018).
- There is a lack of information regarding access, retention, and graduation of indigenous people who migrated from their communities or who do not live in predominantly rural areas with intercultural bilingual education (EIB) schools. National educational regulations do not guarantee the right of indigenous peoples to EIB in areas that have not traditionally been indigenous territories (Corbetta et al., 2020).
- It is problematic to assert a priori that ethnicized populations want to preserve their traditions. It is often assumed, again, that ethnicized peoples preserve for humanity a material and immaterial heritage that must be museumized and reproduced *ad infinitum* without modification. Furthermore, it is assumed that they have a collective will that leads them to desire—universally, as a single unit, a unique voice for each group—this preservation. However, since the arrival of Christians to what would become America, ethnic groups have always been immersed in transnational trade networks that have shaped modern ways of being. Here we face a dilemma: it is as conservative to push ethnicized people to recreate their perhaps lost traditions as it is to ignore those assumed traditions and identities and insert them into a school culture that reproduces hegemonic epistemologies, ontologies, and knowledges.
- Ethnoeducational policies for Afro-Colombians remain subsumed under a framework of indigenous policies. There have been advances, but Afro-Colombian identity only managed to access benefits when it succeeded in asserting

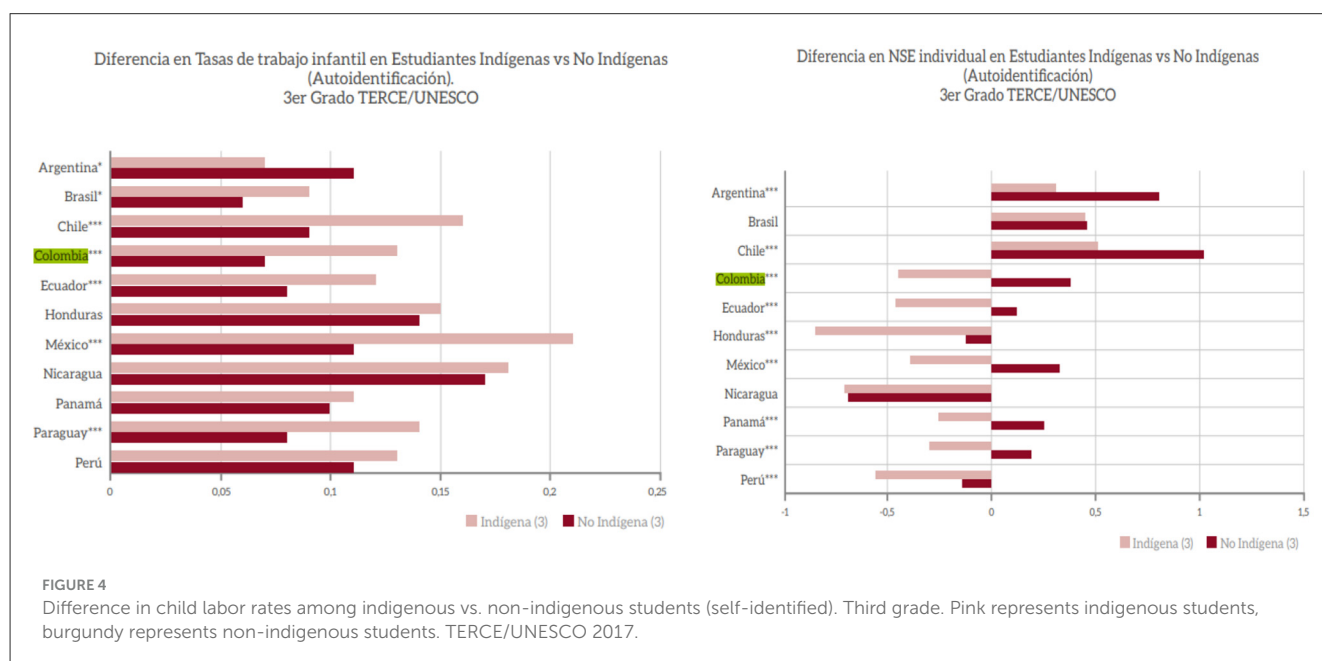
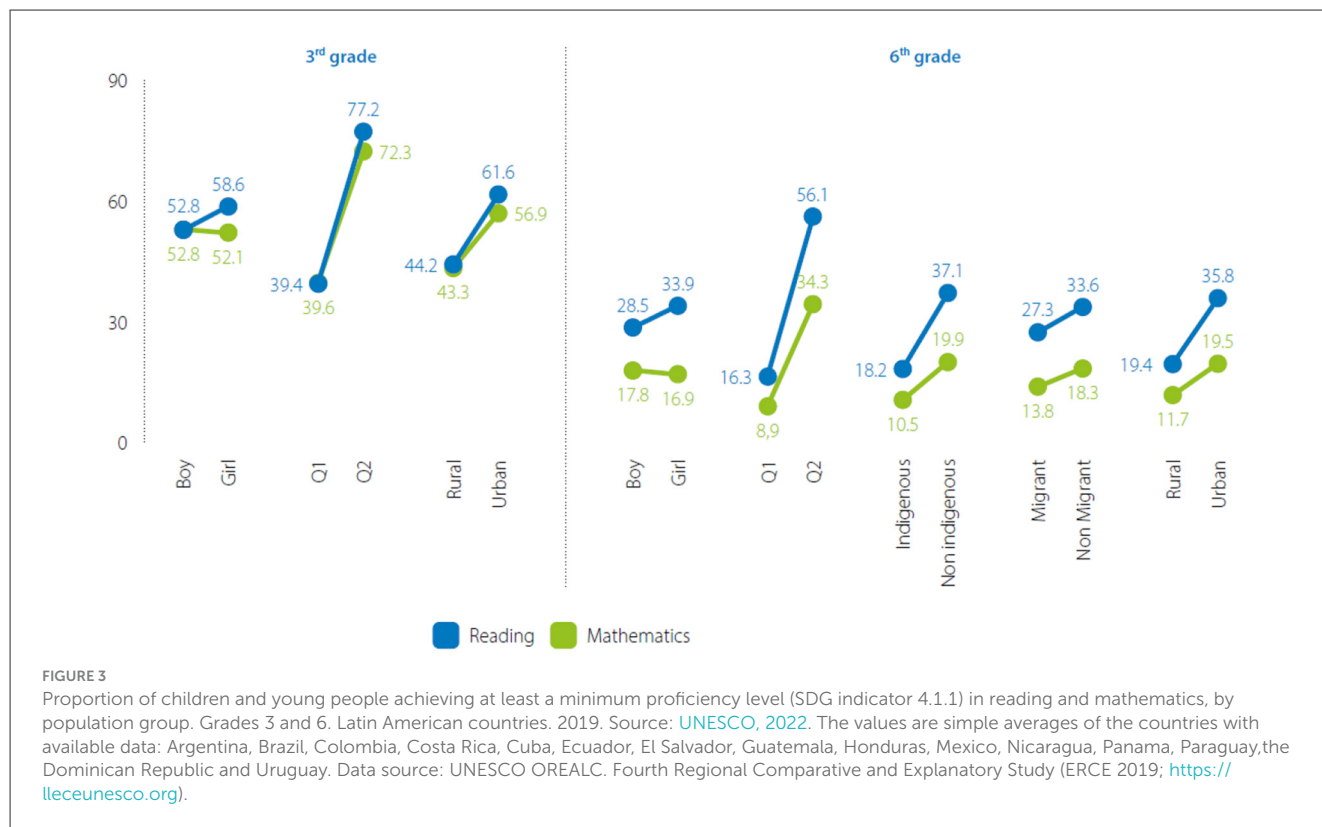


itself as an ethnic community with its own culture, following the path of policies focused on indigenous peoples.

- The Afro-Colombian studies course (mandatory according to Decree 1122–1998—regulating Law No. 70–1993—Article 1) is not usually implemented consistently, but rather left to the “autonomy and needs of each institution,” often limited to “isolated events of showcase or exoticism in the celebration of certain dates” [Angela E. Mena cited in Corbetta (2021)]. This is also reflected in the lack of Afro-Colombian content in Social Sciences school textbooks, with knowledge continuing to be transmitted orally. Furthermore, school textbooks lack images that represent the ethnic diversity of the country.
- Ethnoeducation continues to be thought of as a service for ethnic communities rather than for all citizens. This is evidenced by the fact that certain schools, chosen for being located in traditionally indigenous regions and meeting certain characteristics associated with indigeneity, become ethnoeducational, while schools throughout the country continue with curricula fully focused on hegemonic knowledge demanded by the global market. This contributes to the perpetuation of monolithic representations of ethnic communities as engaged in traditional, ahistorical, spiritual

practices and manual labor, in contrast to white-mestizo populations, who are framed as modern, technical, and fully integrated into the logic of capital. Additionally, it is difficult to find genuine intercultural enrichment, understanding, and respect for the other when such dichotomies exist that in practice do not engage in dialogue. Thus, aseptic multiculturalism continues. So much so that when demonstrating proficiency in a second language, for example in postgraduate programs, indigenous languages are often not recognized (Mora et al., 2019).

- There are ethnoeducational policies and environmental education policies, although both contain elements of the other. However, the true strength seems to lie in the synergy between the ecological knowledge of communities—often indigenous, but also campesino, Black, mestizo, etc.—who have been intertwined with the land and knowledge related to cultural practices. There is no prior division in language between the conception of the world vs. ways of inhabiting nature. So, why separate them in practice?
- There are significant wage inequalities between ethnoeducators and teachers in urban schools, and the hiring modalities are unfavorable to the former. Additionally,



significant gaps remain in the pedagogical training of teachers from ethnic communities, while among white-mestizo ethnoeducators, there are persistent deficiencies in training related to the cultural knowledge, customs, and languages of the students they serve. There are also deficiencies in access to educational materials (Corbetta, 2021).

- As can be seen in Figures 4, 5 indigenous students have a much lower socioeconomic index than their non-indigenous peers

and are forced to work from an early age. That is, policies allocating resources to families per child attending school are insufficient.

- It is worth highlighting the work carried out by universities such as the Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University, where “to obtain their degree, students must propose a practical project linked to the life plans of the communities, to their survival, called *crisac* (raising and sowing wisdom

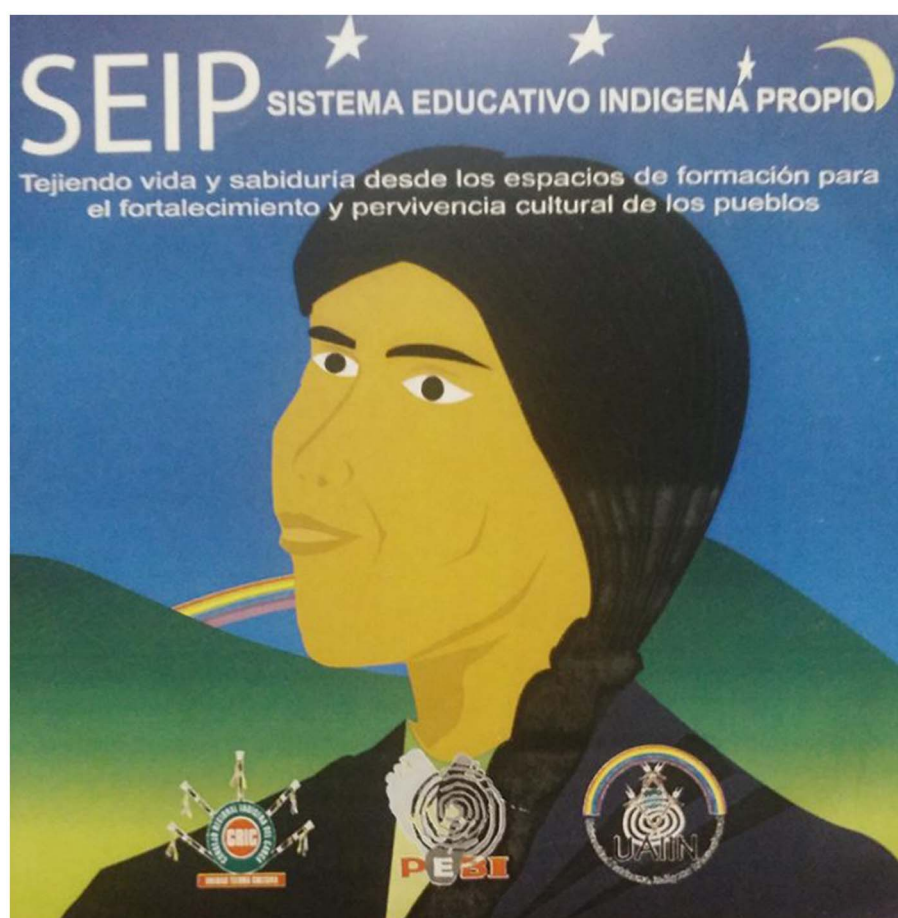


FIGURE 5

Difference in individual SES among indigenous vs. non-indigenous students (self-identified). Third grade. TERCE/UNESCO.

and knowledge)” [Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University (UAIIN-CRIC), 2023], which seeks to provide a solution to a community problem.

Public policy recommendations

Coordination for the ecosystem: intercultural education for everyone

It is necessary to overcome the paradigm that ethno-education is only for ethnically identified communities and that it can be addressed solely through policies related to bilingualism, the “preservation” of traditions for each community in isolation, and the allocation of quotas for higher education. This way of implementing ethno-education has been the result of essentialist understandings of ethnicities as rural, traditional, and frozen in time. Such essentialism often results in a museum-like approach to culture—one that treats it as static, closed, and destined only for preservation. To overcome this, it is crucial to affirm the relevance of cultural difference in a global context without falling into processes of normalization that dilute distinct identities. Culture should not be framed as “exotic” or timeless heritage, but rather as a living, evolving expression of identity rooted

in everyday social life. Moreover, the role of the economy in shaping how cultures are valued must be critically examined. The commodification of cultural expressions—often for tourism or heritage industries—risks reinforcing reductive, exoticizing views that disconnect communities from the living knowledge systems they sustain. A truly intercultural education must instead recognize these cultural practices as part of broader identity economies that link tradition with innovation, subsistence, and local development.

That essentialist way of implementing ethno-education has also contributed to ethnic groups not appropriating their own traditions, reflecting the undervaluation by the dominant society. Therefore, a focus on intercultural education for everyone is key, following the principles of the Andean Charter for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (Americas et al., 2002) and ILO Convention 169 [International Labour Organization (ILO, 1989)]. This would also help resolve conflicts between communities coexisting in the same territory who prefer different educational modalities, as well as the problem of non-identification of ethnic students in urban areas.

Thus, it is recommended to modify curricula so that ethno-educational activities are not isolated from the dominant set of subjects linked to hegemonic knowledge, but instead are transversal and for all students. Curricula should be understood as living entities in constant transformation, in line with students’ needs

and interests and with changing circumstances, so that educational services correspond to the realities of local, national, and international communities. Children themselves will teach their parents these knowledges, contributing to a genuine appreciation of the country's cultural diversity, and thus, starting from school, the ecosystem could be transformed. Thirty four years after the constitutional reform, it is necessary to overcome the paradigm of an aseptic respect for otherness “without mixing.” That is, without a critical interculturality (Tubino, 2005) rooted in the decolonization of the entire educational system, the structural racism perpetuating the sub alternization of ethnicized groups will not be dismantled. Critical interculturality refers to an approach that goes beyond superficial recognition of cultural differences to actively question and transform power relations, colonial legacies, and structural inequalities within society and education. It promotes genuine dialogue and mutual learning between knowledge systems, aiming to decolonize education and build more just and inclusive communities.

From a global perspective, it is crucial to recognize the existing networks of dialogue and understanding between cultures. In this sense, the goal is not to translate cultures—as if they were closed systems requiring equivalencies—but to understand them on their own epistemic and ethical terms. Cultures do not need translation to be legitimate; they demand comprehension and unconditional recognition. It is through coexistence that cultural difference becomes possible in a world increasingly shaped by homogenization.

Furthermore, it is recommended to promote inter sectoral work with an ethno- development approach aimed at creating productive units in all schools that connect students with their environment. Ethno-development is a model of development that centers the rights, worldviews, and aspirations of ethnic communities, empowering them to define and lead their own social, cultural, and economic progress. This approach would recognize the historical contributions of ethnic communities in environmental, social, cultural, economic, and civic spheres to the country. For this, it is necessary to transition teacher training for all educators toward mandatory education in interculturality, and in Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Palenquero, Raizal, Rom, and Romani knowledges, as well as an ethnic language. It has been observed that, faced with deficits in Indigenous knowledge, ethno-educators tend to teach hegemonic knowledges, carrying the burden of prejudices inherited from the educational system that shaped them.

To achieve this kind of systemic change, a persistent awareness campaign is needed for the entire society, highlighting the role of ethnically identified communities in the construction of the country, the persistence of racially based inequalities, and the benefits that everyone would gain from such an intercultural project.

Updating and systematizing information

Although there have been advances in sharing successful ethno-educational experiences and recognizing failures in their implementation, it is essential to systematize information and keep it up to date so that lessons learned can be replicated, evaluated,

and adjusted based on evidence. In this regard, it is necessary to continue visiting communities—both rural and urban—to conduct ethnographies, gather quantitative data, and review what has happened with social relationships, power struggles, and children's learning processes. It is also crucial to monitor the educational and professional trajectories of graduates to study the impacts of education on their social engagement. This analysis highlights the importance of understanding ethnic identities in a situated and relational manner, recognizing their interconnections with other equally fluid social groups, such as peasants, mestizo populations, and white people. Regarding reports of poor educational quality in schools associated with ethno-education, this would be addressed through an intercultural education system for all, since the curricula would share a similar structure. It is recommended that the state act as a guarantor of quality and strengthen an incentive system to attract the best teachers to the areas farthest from urban centers. This systematization of information would also be useful to provide economic and psychosocial support to those who need it most: if children must work to support their families, travel long distances to reach schools, or suffer violence at school, it will be very difficult for them to complete their studies without such assistance.

Evaluate to improve

How can we know whether we are on the right track if we are not engaged in a process of constant evaluation and adjustment? The recommendation is to maintain standardized tests that serve to measure the system as a whole, but not to assess individual children. These tests should focus on basic knowledge relevant to globalized societies, but should also include evaluations of concepts linked to the worldviews of local ethnic communities and intercultural knowledge for all students. It is essential to move beyond the paradigm of hyper-quantification and understand that not everything is measurable (see Balán, 2025), while still being able to identify, with a degree of objectivity, what needs to be improved.

Operationalize

To operationalize the proposed systemic transformation toward critical intercultural education, we recommend a phased implementation roadmap over the next decade. Phase one (Years 1–2) should focus on the development and piloting of intercultural curricula in selected urban and rural schools with diverse student populations, supported by cross-ministerial collaboration between the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Environment. Phase two (Years 3–5) would scale up teacher training programs—grounded in Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other minoritized knowledges—through partnerships with universities and normal schools. This phase should also launch a national awareness campaign to challenge racial hierarchies and build public support. Phase three (Years 6–10) would institutionalize intercultural education nationwide by modifying accreditation standards, allocating sustained budget lines, and establishing a centralized observatory for monitoring and evaluating outcomes in equity, inclusion, and learning. Throughout all phases, pilot programs

should include participatory mechanisms for local communities to co-design and assess initiatives, ensuring responsiveness to specific territorial and cultural contexts.

Closing remarks

While this brief advocates for systemic transformation through critical intercultural education, we recognize the political and institutional challenges such proposals entail. Resistance may stem from sectors invested in maintaining existing hierarchies, but also from dominant-society schools unaccustomed to viewing themselves as part of an intercultural project (Corbetta, 2021; Fontana, 2018). The idea that white-mestizo students should engage with Indigenous and Afro-descendant histories, languages, and epistemologies often clashes with entrenched narratives of national identity, curriculum neutrality, and meritocracy (Mora et al., 2019). Teachers in these schools may lack both the training and institutional incentives to deliver such content meaningfully, and some families may view these changes as politicized or irrelevant. Furthermore, the challenges are amplified in urban contexts where ethnic identities tend to be rendered invisible or flattened under homogenizing discourses of citizenship and modernity (Pineda et al., 2019). Implementing intercultural education in such settings demands both curriculum reform and broader public engagement to reposition cultural diversity as a shared national asset, not a peripheral concern. Without addressing these resistances—particularly within the dominant society—efforts to decolonize education will remain partial and asymmetric.

By transitioning toward an educational system that understands critical interculturality as both a right and a responsibility for everyone, we could move away from a merely functional interculturality and approach the ideal of a multiethnic and multicultural country that truly advocates for equity. The full engagement of white and mestizo sectors in intercultural education could contribute to destabilizing naturalized processes of subalternization within social relations and to dismantling racisms entrenched in colonial histories. In doing so, it would create the conditions of possibility for historically subalternized peoples to flourish—not only within their own communities, but also across the country and the wider world.

It is clear that such a project goes beyond the realm of education alone; it could spark a transformation of social relations themselves. This transformation would likely unsettle certain sectors, as it

intersects with other fundamental rights, including the right to land, health, and dignified work. Nonetheless, this project becomes essential if there is a genuine commitment to building the kind of country envisioned in the Constitution.

Author contributions

LB: Visualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Software, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. Fundación Universitaria los Libertadores funded the Open Access of this paper.

Conflict of interest

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