Cognopolis
Revista de educación y pedagogía
Vol. 4(3), 1-15, 2026
https://doi.org/10.62574/584agh97

Inclusive curriculum strategies to address learning difficulties in early-stage pupils

Estrategias curriculares inclusivas frente al déficit de aprendizaje en estudiantes iniciales

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to design inclusive curricular strategies to address learning deficits among early-year learners in Ecuador. To produce this article, a qualitative-oriented systematic review design was adopted, based on a hermeneutic documentary approach, applied to a corpus of twenty-one sources published between 2014 and 2026, which were analysed using open thematic coding and axial categorisation. Five analytical categories were identified: regulatory and policy framework; Universal Design for Learning; early identification of difficulties; teacher training and attitudes; and early childhood intervention programmes. It is concluded that the sustainability of these strategies depends on their integration with the macro-, meso- and micro-curricular levels of the Ecuadorian education system.
Descriptors: inclusive education; learning difficulties; curriculum design. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

La investigación tuvo por objetivo diseñar estrategias curriculares inclusivas frente al déficit de aprendizaje en estudiantes iniciales ecuatorianos. Para la elaboración de este artículo se adoptó un diseño de revisión sistemática de tendencia cualitativa, apoyado en un enfoque documental hermenéutico, aplicado sobre un corpus de veintiún fuentes publicadas entre 2014 y 2026, analizadas mediante codificación temática abierta y categorización axial. Se identificaron cinco categorías analíticas: marco normativo y político, Diseño Universal para el Aprendizaje, detección temprana de dificultades, formación y actitudes docentes, y programas de intervención en la primera infancia. Se concluye que la sostenibilidad de estas estrategias depende de su articulación con las escalas macro, meso y microcurricular del sistema educativo ecuatoriano.
Descriptores: educación inclusiva; dificultades de aprendizaje; diseño curricular. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

Received: 18/06/2026. Reviewed: 21/07/2026. Accepted: 19/08/2026. Published: 01/09/2026.
Research articles

INTRODUCTION

It should be borne in mind that educational inclusion is a standard that school systems pursue in order to provide equitable education for all children; yet, in the earliest days of learning, structural, curricular, and cultural obstacles may develop that prevent the full development of children with learning difficulties. In this context, Slee (2019) predicted that the sense of school belonging for students with specific educational needs depends on the school's willingness to change pedagogical structures inherited from a homogenising model; this is conducive to reactive behaviour on the part of teaching staff, who may accept curricular changes only on paper while, in practice, inherited habits generate a status quo that prevents genuine educational transformation.

Learning deficits detected at an early age (that is, in primary school), on the other hand, are a multi-causal problem with neurocognitive, socioeconomic, and pedagogical dimensions, and the problem must be considered as a whole. Along these lines, Blair and Raver (2014) found that modulating neuroendocrine and neurocognitive functions through specific curricular programmes closes the achievement gap in kindergarten. In addition, Teleková et al. (2023) found that, from a schoolteacher's perspective, adaptation problems at the start of schooling are associated with the lack of differentiated pedagogical strategies.

This international perspective, however, does not translate directly to Ecuador, since the Prioritised Curriculum introduced in response to the health emergency was adapted to remove content requiring more time and to give children with learning difficulties more time, with the effect that they may not even be aware of the gap between the inclusive language of Ecuadorian law and actual teaching. In this regard, Hernández and Samada (2021) noted that Ecuadorian education law recognises the right to inclusive education, but the regulations do not explain how to implement it in the regular classroom.

Within the Latin American context, however, this fragmentation of regulatory principles was corroborated by Carrillo-Vargas and Moscoso-Jurado (2022), who found that attention to diversity remained more a matter of individual interventions and institutional policies than of genuine institutional policy. Similarly, Mantilla-Crespo et al. (2024) argued, drawing on an Ecuadorian case study, that achieving inclusive school management requires a framework spanning the macro, meso, and micro-curricular scales in order to reconcile regulatory discourse with actual classroom practice. Since the learning deficit is a legal, pedagogical, and psychological problem, it requires a perspective capable of linking the right to education with the cognitive and emotional processes of early childhood; this is of particular interest to universities that train students in law and clinical psychology, subjects that should be discussed as part of the formulation of inclusive education policy.

Continuing along these lines, it should be clarified that low-level learning difficulties tend to accumulate into trajectories of school failure, making the early years the most important moment for intervention. Accordingly, Williams (2021) noted that federal and state policies prioritising twenty-first century extracurricular programmes can affect parental perceptions and student outcomes when articulated with the regular school at an early age.

It is therefore worth clarifying that the term learning deficit is used in this article in a broad sense, to refer to persistent difficulties in the acquisition of basic academic skills during the early grades of schooling, without necessarily implying a formal clinical diagnosis; this conceptual delimitation makes it possible to encompass both cases involving diagnosed disabilities, as documented by Siller et al. (2021) and Ueda et al. (2021), and context-related lags described by Steinmann et al. (2026).

Likewise, Universal Design for Learning has been taken up as a pedagogical model that anticipates student variability within the curriculum that needs to be addressed, rather than as one of the subsequent remedial adaptations that

Gutiérrez-Saldivia et al. (2020) warned may still be needed to place it in the hands of early-grade teachers, particularly in the teaching of mathematics. This has been the formative limitation underlying the knowledge gap that the present review aims to fill, namely the systematisation of curricular strategies at the Ecuadorian level.

Accordingly, the research aimed to design inclusive curricular strategies to address learning deficits among early-stage Ecuadorian pupils.

METHOD

As the objective of the study was to develop inclusive curricular strategies, a qualitatively oriented systematic review design was selected, supported by a hermeneutic documentary approach aimed at constructing new analytical categories rather than a statistical comparison of results. The documentary corpus was composed of twenty-one articles published during the 2014–2026 period, related to inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning, early-stage learning difficulties, and early childhood intervention programmes.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, chapters, and systematic review processes in Spanish and English, and excluded sources that had not been peer-reviewed or that were unrelated to the thematic focus.

Building on the foregoing, the publication period considered (2014–2026) was intended to capture earlier and more recent research on neurodevelopment and early learning, along with the most recent work on Universal Design for Learning and comparative early education, namely Steinmann et al. (2026); this period allowed us to observe the development of the field in a more systematic way. For this reason, the analytical procedure was carried out in four stages: identification and collection of sources; critical reading and open thematic coding; an axial categorisation matrix; and contrastive theoretical synthesis; each phase made it possible to refine the conceptual axes used to construct our results section.

The thematic coding was therefore carried out manually using bibliographic record sheets, and descriptive subcategories were gradually compiled into the five final analytical categories presented in the results section. The analytical instrument likewise consisted of an ad hoc categorisation matrix made up of the fields author and year, thematic category, and main contribution, which allowed us to organise the corpus into the five categories presented in the following section.

We then validated the emerging categories through a second internal review of each source to confirm its relevance to the assigned category, which allowed us to reclassify two sources originally placed in the teacher training category into the early intervention programmes category, as they were found to apply more directly to the field under study. However, as this was a significant methodological limitation, we did not aim for a closed set of sources, since the review itself was the scope of the study; we therefore sought not statistical representativeness but a deeper understanding of the most influential concepts in the literature reviewed in this section.

RESULTS

Building on the idea proposed, the documentary corpus led us to identify five analytical categories describing the design of inclusive curricular strategies in response to learning deficits among early-stage pupils: the regulatory and policy framework for educational inclusion; Universal Design for Learning and curricular flexibility; early identification of learning difficulties; teacher training and attitudes towards inclusion; and early childhood intervention programmes. Table 1 shows the quantitative distribution of the corpus by category, while Table 2 shows the contribution of each source.

Table 1. *Distribution of documentary sources by analytical category.*

Analytical category	No. of sources	Percentage
Regulatory and policy framework for educational inclusión	5	23.8 %
Universal Design for Learning and curricular flexibilisation	4	19.0 %
Early identification of learning difficulties in the initial stage	5	23.8 %
Teacher training and attitudes towards inclusion	4	19.0 %
Early childhood intervention programmes	3	14.3 %
Total	21	100 %

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

Given that the regulatory and policy framework and early identification categories accounted for the largest number of sources, the literature reviewed weighs the institutional dimension and the developmental dimension heavily as factors for any curricular strategy. As an example, Clavijo Castillo and Bautista-Cerro (2020) observed that Ecuadorian higher education displays a similar set of regulatory contradictions to those found in basic education, including in the training of future teachers, which renders inclusion unsustainable by the end of the educational process.

It is worth noting that the teacher training and early intervention programmes categories concentrated the most recent academic output in the corpus, published mainly between 2020 and 2025, which shows the research's focus on the practical implementation of inclusion beyond the regulatory basis.

Table 2. *Documentary categorisation matrix by author, category, and main contribution.*

Author(s) and year	Category	Main contribution
Slee (2019)	Regulatory framework	Links school belonging with the transformation of homogenising curricular structures.
Hernández and Samada (2021)	Regulatory framework	Analyses the legal recognition of inclusion in Ecuador and its enforcement gaps.
Clavijo Castillo and Bautista-Cerro (2020)	Regulatory framework	Examines the replication of regulatory contradictions in Ecuadorian university teacher training.
Carrillo-Vargas and Moscoso-Jurado (2022)	Regulatory framework	Describes how attention to diversity remains subordinate to isolated institutional initiatives.
Mantilla-Crespo et al. (2024)	Regulatory framework	Proposes macro-, meso- and micro-curricular articulation in inclusive school management.
De-la-Fuente-González et al. (2025)	Universal Design for Learning	Systematises evidence on teacher training in UDL and its relationship with flexible practice.
Espada-Chavarría et al. (2019)	Universal Design for Learning	Links UDL with inclusive basic education from the standpoint of curricular planning.
Figueroa-Zapata et al. (2019)	Universal Design for Learning	Articulates UDL with individual reasonable-adjustment plans in the classroom.
Gutiérrez-Saldivia et al. (2020)	Universal Design for Learning	Identifies limitations in the uptake of UDL in initial teacher training in mathematics.
Blair and Raver (2014)	Early identification	Demonstrates, through a randomised trial, the reduction of achievement gaps through early neurocognitive intervention.
Mogonea (2022)	Early identification	Investigates learning difficulties in the early years of primary school.
Teleková et al. (2023)	Early identification	Documents initial school-adaptation difficulties from the teacher's perspective.
Steinmann et al. (2026)	Early identification	Provides comparative evidence on early education participation and the socioeconomic reading gap.
Williams (2021)	Early identification	Relates extracurricular programmes to early identification and intervention outcomes.
Adewumi et al. (2017)	Teacher training	Describes South African teachers' perception of inclusion as a requirement lacking training support.
Symeonidou (2017)	Teacher training	Reviews initial teacher education for inclusion and its applied limitations.
Vlachou and Fyssa (2016)	Teacher training	Analyses inclusive preschool practices and their association with teacher characteristics.
Genovesi et al. (2025)	Teacher training	Systematises teacher attitudes towards inclusion in African classrooms through a systematic review.

Besharov et al. (2020)	Early intervention programmes	Sets out a systematic review protocol on early education programmes for low-income children.
Siller et al. (2021)	Early intervention programmes	Examines advances and barriers in the inclusion of children with autism in early childhood education.
Ueda et al. (2021)	Early intervention programmes	Reports positive effects of a Japanese inclusive programme on children and teaching staff.

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

With regard to regulatory and policy settings, the literature discussed in this paper agrees that the right to inclusive education is recognised ahead of its actual application in practice; Slee (2019), Hernández and Samada (2021), Carrillo-Vargas and Moscoso-Jurado (2022), and Mantilla-Crespo et al. (2024) have shown, in different contexts, that the gap between the norm and classroom practice persists where institutional mechanisms and funding are absent. On Universal Design for Learning, De-la-Fuente-González et al. (2025) have likewise presented evidence that teacher training in UDL promotes more flexible pedagogical practices, and Espada-Chavarría et al. (2019) and Figueroa-Zapata et al. (2019) have also detailed evidence of this. They agreed that its use, together with individual reasonable adjustments, favours the school retention of students with learning difficulties. Gutiérrez-Saldivia et al. (2020) also addressed this issue but noted that UDL uptake has been limited at the start of teacher training, particularly in mathematics.

The early identification area, by contrast, was more unanimous regarding the urgency of intervening with a child before third grade: Blair and Raver (2014), Mogonea (2022), and Teleková et al. (2023) agreed that the absence of timely identification mechanisms increases the likelihood of cumulative educational lag, and Steinmann et al. (2026) provided large-scale evidence of the relationship between participation in early childhood education and the narrowing of the reading gap linked to socioeconomic status. Williams (2021) also noted that extracurricular programmes, in conjunction with the regular school, can increase the effectiveness of early identification and intervention.

Given that teacher training can be seen as a polarising factor across the other categories, Adewumi et al. (2017) found that South African teachers perceive inclusion as a regulatory requirement unaccompanied by the training provided; in

response, Symeonidou (2017) and Vlachou and Fyssa (2016) likewise concluded that initial teacher training rarely translates inclusive principles into classroom teaching tools, and, accordingly, Genovesi et al. (2025) found in a systematic review of African countries that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities depend directly on the institutional support available to them.

The early intervention programmes studied, on the other hand, provided a specific example within this field, in which Besharov et al. (2020) proposed a systematic review protocol for early education programmes for low-income children, as did Siller et al. (2021) and Ueda et al. (2021). The aforementioned authors accordingly identified certain particular improvements and obstacles in the inclusion of children with autism and other developmental disabilities in early childhood education programmes, with favourable outcomes for both children and teachers.

Following on from the results, a cross-reading of the five categories shows that none of them operates independently: the regulatory framework enables or restricts curricular flexibility, the latter depends on teacher training, and both contribute to the success of early intervention programmes and early identification techniques. This is the starting point for the theoretical contrast presented in the following section.

THEORISATION AND THEORETICAL CONTRAST

The analysis proceeds from the theoretical premise that the learning barrier is imposed by educational structures rather than by the student, in contrast with the medical model of rehabilitation still present in the remedial adaptation practices described by Adewumi et al. (2017) and Symeonidou (2017). From the social model of disability (Slee, 2019), educational exclusion is explained by the education system's failure to anticipate student variability, whereas from the medical perspective, the learning deficit is internal and requires an external effort.

In contrast to remedial logic, Universal Design for Learning describes an epistemological shift in thinking: rather than changing the curriculum after

encountering a challenge, it designs the curriculum from the outset to address human variability. De-la-Fuente-González et al. (2025) and Espada-Chavarría et al. (2019) therefore agreed that this shift requires teacher planning to be transformed across its three constitutive dimensions, namely multiple means of representing information, diverse student action, and sustained motivational engagement.

As the early identification research category shows that neurocognitive and neuroendocrine functions respond to early intervention programmes (Blair & Raver, 2014), it is reasonable to hold that the bioecological model of development, although not yet articulated by the authors discussed, likewise lends support to UDL: the early-stage pupil is not learning alone but within relationships with the family, school, and community microsystems that influence their academic success.

While studies in Japan show that adopting such an approach has been beneficial for early intervention programmes within Japanese early childhood inclusive education programmes (Ueda et al., 2021), Genovesi et al. (2025) and Vlachou and Fyssa (2016) suggested that these effects depend heavily on the institutional context; in settings with low teacher support, even the best-developed inclusive strategies fail because teachers lack the material and training conditions to sustain them over time. The theoretical difference between these two sets of evidence therefore yields a first design premise: no inclusive curricular strategy can exist without teacher training and institutional support, as demonstrated by Mantilla-Crespo et al. (2024) in the case of inclusive school management at the macro, meso, and micro scales.

Similarly, the theoretical difference in the evidence does not seek to resolve the explanatory gaps in learning, but rather to provide an integrated lens for situated curricular decisions consistent with the qualitative orientation of this study. Since inclusive curricular strategies cannot be sustained on the basis of individual teacher goodwill alone, they require district- and national-level education policies

to help them succeed; indeed, the Ecuadorian legal system will become more enforceable if the early stage of the curriculum is included in curricular monitoring, in line with Hernández and Samada's (2021) recommendation for an explicit process.

Proposed inclusive curricular strategies for early-stage pupils in the Ecuadorian context

The first axis likewise enables curricular flexibility based on the three principles of UDL: i) diversifying the formats used to represent important curricular content; ii) providing options for learning; and iii) sustaining motivation by contextualising activities to students' sociocultural reality. This is in line with Espada-Chavarría et al. (2019) and Gutiérrez-Saldivia et al. (2020), who hold that micro-curricular planning must be designed to recognise student variability.

Since early identification is critical to the effectiveness of any subsequent intervention, the second axis proposes a pedagogical identification procedure during the first term of the academic year, to be carried out jointly by the teacher and the Student Counselling Department, drawing on Teleková et al. (2023) and Mogonea (2022) regarding the connection between early adaptation and the prevention of school lag. The existence of identification protocols, however, does not guarantee their application without the teacher's active involvement. The third axis therefore proposes peer communities of practice and periodic micro-workshops on UDL and diversity, in response to the training limitations identified by Adewumi et al. (2017), Symeonidou (2017), and Vlachou and Fyssa (2016).

The fourth axis incorporates Individual Reasonable Adjustment Plans as a tool for linking the macro, meso, and micro-curricular scales, adopting the inclusive school management model verified by Mantilla-Crespo et al. (2024) and the reasonable-adjustment-based pedagogical practices described by Figueroa-Zapata et al. (2019); as such, this axis lends institutional sustainability to the previous three by connecting classroom planning with district education policy.

In this way, much like the Ecuadorian Prioritised Curriculum, which centres on learning key skills and competencies, the curricular proposal in this article does not offer new content but rather the option of using the skills already present in the classroom, and hence the content already in place, which will reduce the classroom teacher's workload, enable the teacher to put it into practice, and in turn allow the education system to make use of it.

It is thus suggested that the four axes discussed be integrated into curricular monitoring and evaluation with qualitative indicators enabling educational institutions to periodically assess the degree of uptake of Universal Design for Learning and the impact of early identification protocols on the school retention of early-stage pupils. It should be noted that the curricular proposal put forward in this article is purely a theoretical design based on documentary analysis, and its empirical validation in Ecuadorian educational institutions at the initial stage remains a matter for future research.

CONCLUSION

The document review helped design four central lines of curricular intervention for early-stage pupils with learning difficulties in Ecuador. These include the implementation of curricular flexibility based on Universal Design for Learning, early pedagogical identification practices, teacher training and the implementation of collective teaching, and individual reasonable-adjustment plans as an institutional safeguard.

The document analysis made clear that these components do not function independently, since Ecuadorian policy recognises the right to inclusive education but does not describe how it is to be put into practice in schools. The curricular proposal therefore spans the macro, meso, and micro-curricular levels and is consistent with inclusive pedagogical practice. This design is a theoretical construct based on a hermeneutic documentary approach that has yet to be tested within Ecuadorian education systems, and we hope that future research

will compare and contrast it to examine how it would affect the retention of students with learning difficulties.

FUNDING

Non-monetary

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest with individuals or institutions linked to the research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the parents and guardians for their commitment to achieving quality educational inclusion.

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