



## **Educational Inclusion in Bilingual Programs in Colombia: Divergent Perceptions Among Teachers and School Leaders in Private Elementary Schools in Santander**

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**Abstract:** This article critically analyzes the divergent perceptions of teachers and school leaders regarding educational inclusion in bilingual programs in private primary institutions in Santander, Colombia. Drawing on a qualitative multiple case study design, focus group analysis reveals tensions between a normative discourse of inclusion, predominantly articulated by school leaders, and a more restricted, diagnosis-centered understanding that prevails among teachers. While diversified pedagogical practices are identified in classroom settings, these practices tend to emerge from individual initiatives rather than from institutionalized approaches supported by situated professional development. The findings underscore the need for contextualized educational policies that integrate bilingualism, inclusion, and school leadership within a social justice framework informed by the political economy of language. The study contributes to rethinking the implementation of bilingual programs in Latin American contexts characterized by structural inequalities.

**Keywords:** bilingual education; educational inclusion; social justice; school leadership; translanguaging

### **Inclusión educativa en programas bilingües en Colombia: Percepciones divergentes entre docentes y directivos escolares en escuelas privadas de educación básica en Santander**

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza críticamente las percepciones divergentes de docentes y directivos escolares sobre la inclusión educativa en programas bilingües en instituciones primarias privadas de Santander, Colombia. A partir de un diseño cualitativo de estudio de casos múltiples, el análisis de grupos focales evidencia tensiones entre un discurso normativo de inclusión, predominantemente sostenido por los directivos escolares, y una comprensión más restringida y centrada en el diagnóstico, presente entre los docentes. Si bien se identifican prácticas pedagógicas diversificadas en el aula, estas suelen surgir como iniciativas individuales y no como enfoques institucionalizados respaldados por procesos de formación situada. Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de políticas educativas contextualizadas que articulen bilingüismo, inclusión y liderazgo escolar desde un enfoque de justicia social informado por la economía política del lenguaje. El estudio aporta elementos para repensar la implementación de programas bilingües en contextos latinoamericanos atravesados por desigualdades estructurales. **Palabras-clave:** educación bilingüe; inclusión educativa; justicia social; liderazgo escolar; translenguaje

### **Inclusão educacional em programas bilíngues na Colômbia: Percepções divergentes entre docentes e dirigentes escolares em escolas privadas de educação básica em Santander**

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa criticamente as percepções divergentes de professores e dirigentes escolares sobre a inclusão educacional em programas bilíngues em instituições privadas de ensino fundamental em Santander, Colômbia. Baseado em um desenho de estudo de múltiplos casos qualitativos, a análise de grupos focais revela tensões entre um discurso normativo de inclusão, predominantemente articulado pelos dirigentes escolares, e uma compreensão mais restrita, centrada em diagnósticos, que prevalece entre os professores. Embora práticas pedagógicas diversificadas sejam identificadas em contextos de sala de aula, essas práticas tendem a emergir de iniciativas individuais, em vez de abordagens institucionalizadas apoiadas por desenvolvimento profissional situado. Os achados destacam a necessidade de políticas educacionais contextualizadas que integrem bilinguismo, inclusão e liderança escolar em uma estrutura de justiça social informada pela economia política da linguagem. O estudo contribui para repensar a implementação de programas bilíngues em contextos latino-americanos caracterizados por desigualdades estruturais.

**Palavras-chave:** educação bilíngue; inclusão educacional; justiça social; liderança escolar; translanguaging

## **Educational Inclusion in Bilingual Programs in Colombia: Divergent Perceptions Among Teachers and School Leaders in Private Elementary Schools in Santander**

In the current global educational landscape, attention to diversity and the promotion of equitable education are recognized as fundamental pillars for progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2023). In Latin America, and particularly in Colombia, these principles have gained special relevance amid the expansion of bilingual education programs, promoted as strategies to strengthen English communication skills and expand academic and

employment opportunities for students (Bettney, 2023; MEN, 2015). However, the growing implementation of these programs has highlighted persistent tensions between bilingualism objectives and institutional commitments to inclusion and equity, particularly in territories marked by deep structural inequalities.

Several recent studies warn that, in practice, many approaches to bilingual education in Colombia may reproduce exclusionary dynamics when they are not effectively articulated with policies and practices aimed at comprehensive attention to diversity (Gómez, 2017; Jaramillo, 2023). This disconnection is reflected in challenges to address the specific needs of students from rural contexts, low-income families, or interrupted educational trajectories. In response, contemporary literature underscores the need to examine and understand school actors' perceptions and practices as a key step in transforming bilingual programs into genuinely inclusive and socially just initiatives (Bhasin & Román, 2023; Montes Serrano & Tineo Quispe, 2023).

In Colombia, although inclusion has been promoted as a core principle of education policy since Law 115 of 1994 and subsequent guidelines (MEN, 2017), its implementation in bilingual settings still presents gaps in understanding, appropriation, and coherent enactment by school leaders and teachers. This gap between normative discourse and everyday practice is particularly visible in regional contexts such as the department of Santander, where cultural diversity, socioeconomic inequality, and a growing demand for English teaching in primary education converge.

This article analyzes the perceptions and practices of teachers and school leadership teams regarding attention to diversity in bilingual programs in private primary education institutions in Santander, Colombia. The central question guiding the study is: How do school actors conceptualize and enact attention to diversity within bilingual programs in private regional contexts?

Using a qualitative approach and a multiple case study design, data were collected through focus groups differentiated by role, using a semi-structured interview guide. This design enabled the exploration of tensions, convergences, and gaps between inclusion policies and everyday school practices. The article is organized into six sections. First, it presents a critical review of recent literature on inclusion, bilingualism, and social justice. Second, it describes the methodology. Third, it reports the results. Fourth, it develops an analytical discussion distinct from the findings. Fifth, it presents conclusions and recommendations. Finally, it discusses implications for education policy aimed at strengthening equitable and transformative bilingual education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Bilingual Education and Inclusion: Advances and Emerging Tensions**

The concept of bilingual education has evolved from models centered on the instrumental teaching of a foreign language to more comprehensive approaches that articulate linguistic development with principles of equity and social justice. This conceptual shift has brought renewed attention to the structural tensions between the expansion of bilingual programs and substantive commitments to educational inclusion, particularly in Latin American contexts marked by persistent social and economic inequalities. Bettney (2023) warns that, in Latin America, many English as Foreign Language programs reproduce exclusionary dynamics by neglecting students' cultural and socioeconomic realities. Similarly, Cardona-Escobar et al. (2023) argue that the symbolic capital associated with English may reinforce social hierarchies in the absence of effective guarantees of equitable access, retention, and academic success.

These concerns are reinforced by findings reported by Veerman et al. (2025), who emphasize that poorly contextualized bilingual policies risk functioning as exclusionary mechanisms rather than as tools for educational equity. From this perspective, bilingual education must be understood not

merely as the development of instrumental competence, but as a right linked to inclusion and social transformation, requiring coherent normative frameworks and pedagogical practices that respond to local realities.

### **Political Context and Regulatory Framework in Colombia**

Inclusive education and bilingualism in Colombia are framed within a set of constitutional, legal, and programmatic provisions that, in principle, promote access, participation, and learning for all students. Law 115 of 1994 (General Education Law), together with its curricular regulations (Decree 1860 of 1994), establishes a rights-based educational system and grants schools' autonomy to contextualize curricula through their Institutional Education Projects (PEI). More recently, the Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education Guidelines (MEN, 2017) specify that inclusion extends beyond disability or special educational needs and encompasses cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity, a central consideration for bilingual programs operating in unequal territories.

In the domain of bilingualism policy, Colombia has transitioned from the National Bilingualism Program 2004–2019 (MEN, 2006) to the National English Program Colombia Very Well! (MEN, 2015). Although these initiatives frame English as a strategy for mobility and competitiveness, their implementation has been questioned due to limited territorial contextualization, gaps in teacher preparation, and reliance on standardized materials (Gómez, 2017). This orientation may conflict with the linguistic plurality recognized by Law 1381 of 2010 (Native Languages Law), which protects Indigenous and minority languages and requires that bilingual initiatives do not obscure existing linguistic ecologies.

Regarding inclusive education, Law 1618 of 2013 and Decree 1421 of 2017 strengthen guarantees of access and permanence for people with disabilities across educational levels, mandating reasonable adjustments supported by curriculum design and school management. Decree 1075 of 2015 further consolidates obligations related to curriculum, assessment, and governance, enabling schools to align the PEI, Institutional Improvement Plans (PMI), and evaluation frameworks with an inclusion-oriented approach.

This regulatory framework mandates that bilingual programs be contextualized, inclusive, and culturally responsive. Nevertheless, the literature consistently points to gaps between normative discourse and classroom-level enactment, including reliance on standardized resources and the absence of situated professional learning pathways that integrate bilingualism and inclusion. In this context, practices such as translanguaging are legally and pedagogically consistent with Law 1381 of 2010 and the MEN Guidelines (2017), but require institutional validation through methodological guidance, assessment alignment, and pedagogical leadership to move beyond isolated individual initiatives (Beiler & Villacañas, 2025).

### **Educational Inclusion: From Rhetoric to Transformative Practice**

Contemporary understandings of inclusion provide a useful lens for interpreting these tensions. Inclusion is increasingly framed as a dynamic process that recognizes that all students may require differentiated support at different points in their educational trajectories, moving beyond reductionist approaches focused exclusively on disability or special educational needs (UNESCO, 2023). Within this perspective, inclusive pedagogy, grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), is proposed as a key strategy for ensuring access and participation for all learners from the curriculum planning stage onward (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This approach requires bilingual education policies to be anchored in contextualized inclusive practices. Research conducted in Colombia highlights the importance of articulating cultural, linguistic, and social diversity within

everyday classroom practice (Jaramillo, 2023). International evidence further suggests that such practices yield positive cognitive, affective, and social outcomes when supported by coherent policy frameworks and committed leadership (Veerman et al., 2025). From this standpoint, inclusion cannot be reduced to isolated accommodation but must be understood as a structural and political process embedded in school culture.

### **Translanguaging: Critical Pedagogy and the Political Economy of Language**

Translanguaging offers a pedagogical lens that illustrates the intersection between inclusion, social justice, and the political economy of language. By allowing students to flexibly mobilize their full linguistic repertoires, translanguaging challenges rigid language hierarchies and affirms learners' agency as meaning-makers (García & Wei, 2018). In contexts where English operates as symbolic capital, translanguaging can function as a form of pedagogical resistance that disrupts raciolinguistic ideologies and supports more democratic forms of participation (Bhasin & Roman, 2023; Li & Gracia, 2022).

Empirical research in Europe indicates that translanguaging can enhance students' sense of belonging and participation in multilingual classrooms, particularly when supported by adequate teacher preparation (Beatty et al., 2021). This evidence reinforces the view that translanguaging is not simply a methodological tool, but a politically situated practice that requires coherent training frameworks and institutional leadership to be implemented sustainably.

### **School Leadership and Institutional Culture**

The sustainability of inclusive bilingual practices ultimately depends on schools' institutional capacity to support them. School leadership functions as a critical hinge between discourse, practice, and organizational culture. Jaramillo Cárdenas (2023) argues that when coherence between school leaders and teachers is weak, inclusion is reduced to isolated and unsustainable efforts. Similarly, Ainscow & Dyson (2016, 2020) emphasize that inclusion must operate as a structuring axis of school culture rather than as an expression of individual goodwill.

International research supports this view. Studies conducted in the Netherlands show that limited leadership commitment often results in inclusive initiatives being carried out by isolated teachers, reproducing inequities in their application (Hogenes, 2025). From this perspective, school leadership not only facilitates inclusive pedagogical practices but also mediates the relationship between bilingualism policy, translanguaging, and social justice.

### **Guiding Theoretical lens and Analytical Sensitizing Concepts**

Building on the preceding sections, this study adopts an integrated theoretical lens that explicitly structures the analysis and interpretation of findings. This lens combines inclusive pedagogy grounded in Universal Design for Learning, a social justice and political economy of language perspective, and an understanding of school leadership as institutional architecture.

These sensitizing concepts informed the thematic coding and analytical decisions throughout the study. Specifically, they guided attention to: (a) competing conceptualizations of inclusion, particularly tensions between rights-based and diagnosis-based approaches; (b) inclusive pedagogical practices oriented toward instructional flexibility, multimodality, and translanguaging; (c) structural constraints affecting implementation, including fragmented professional development, standardized resources, and weak institutional articulation; and (d) the institutional conditions required for sustainability, such as leadership coherence, clear methodological routes, and alignment with policy frameworks.

In the discussion and policy implications, this integrated lens enables the interpretation of classroom-level practices in relation to institutional dynamics and broader policy contexts, strengthening coherence between the empirical findings and the study's theoretical contribution.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretive orientation, focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and practices of teachers and school leaders regarding diversity in bilingual education programs. Given the interest in exploring socially constructed meanings within specific institutional contexts, a multiple case study design was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006). This design allowed for the examination of commonalities and divergences across different schools while preserving the contextual specificity of each case, particularly in relation to the tensions between bilingual education policies and inclusive practices in settings marked by structural inequality.

### **Context and Participants**

The research was conducted in private primary education institutions located in the department of Santander, Colombia. These schools implement bilingual programs with either national or international orientations and display diversity in terms of infrastructure, institutional trajectories, and students' socioeconomic profiles. This diversity made it possible to observe how principles of equity are enacted, negotiated, or constrained across different educational contexts.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling under a maximum heterogeneity criterion (Patton, 2015), ensuring the inclusion of varied perspectives. A total of 20 key informants participated: 10 classroom teachers and 10 school leaders (heads of school or academic coordinators) from five private educational institutions. All participants had direct experience with bilingual education; school leaders were additionally involved in the coordination or management of bilingual programs and inclusion-related initiatives.

Regarding demographic and professional characteristics, the sample included 12 women and 8 men, aged between 27 and 37 years. Participants reported between 4 and 12 years of teaching experience, representing both early-career and more experienced educators. Half of the participants ( $n = 10$ ) held formal coordination roles within bilingual programs, while the remaining participants were classroom teachers without leadership positions. All participants held undergraduate degrees in language-related fields, including Spanish and English language teaching, English teaching, or languages.

At the graduate level, most participants had completed a master's degree in education, while others held degrees in neuropsychology, applied linguistics, or development-oriented programs focused on children and adolescents. Self-reported English proficiency levels were high across the sample, with most participants reporting C1 (advanced) proficiency and the remainder B2 (upper-intermediate) proficiency, consistent with the demands of bilingual primary education contexts.

### **Techniques and Instruments for Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in focus groups differentiated by role (teachers and school leaders). This differentiation was intended to foster horizontal and reflective dialogue, facilitating the emergence of convergences, tensions, and conceptual gaps without the constraints of hierarchical interaction. The interview guide was validated by experts in inclusive education and bilingualism to ensure alignment with the study objectives and conceptual coherence.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted virtually, considering the logistical conditions in place during the data collection period. Data collection took place in August 2024. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Table 1 presents the relationship between the focus group interview questions and the analytical categories that emerged during the thematic analysis, illustrating how the data collection instrument informed the subsequent coding process.

**Table 1**

*Relationship between Script Questions and Emerging Categories*

Question	Category generated	Subcategories identified
1. Which of the two definitions do you most identify with?	Conceptualization of inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Universalist perspective</li> <li>● Restricted approach (NEE)</li> </ul>
2. Is educational support provided to students? What kind of support? Who provides it and where?	Inclusive pedagogical practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diversified strategies</li> <li>● Lack of systematization</li> </ul>
3. What difficulties do you often encounter in your teaching work in providing teaching that is both bilingual and inclusive? What solutions do you propose to eliminate or reduce these barriers?	Structural barriers and emerging proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Insufficient training</li> <li>● Non-contextualized resources</li> <li>● Lo involvement of families Located training</li> <li>● Clear institutional routes</li> <li>● Intentional translanguaging</li> </ul>
4. Do they condition the presence of some students in the subjects taught in English? What characteristics do these students have?	Structural barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Profile of excluded students</li> <li>● Exclusion factors linked to language and context</li> </ul>

*Note.* Author's own creation.

### **Focus Group Procedures and Management of Role Dynamics**

To mitigate potential power asymmetries between participants, focus groups were conducted separately for teachers and school leaders. All sessions followed the same semi-structured interview guide and were facilitated using comparable moderation strategies. Balanced participation was encouraged through turn-inviting prompts, follow-up questions, and the explicit validation of diverse viewpoints. During analysis, transcripts were examined both within each role group and across groups, allowing for the identification of shared patterns as well as role-specific perspectives.

### **Analysis of Information**

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved five iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated readings

of transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for patterns and thematic groupings, (4) reviewing and refining themes, and (5) defining and naming final categories. This systematic approach enabled the identification of recurring meanings, conceptual tensions, and contradictions between institutional discourse and pedagogical practice.

### **Analytical progression from codes to categories**

To enhance transparency, the analytical progression from initial coding to final categories is explicitly detailed. The first analytical cycle consisted of open coding, during which 65 initial codes were generated directly from participants' verbatim expressions across all focus group transcripts. These codes captured recurrent meanings related to definitions of inclusion, inclusive pedagogical practices, perceived structural barriers, and proposed solutions.

In the second analytical cycle, axial coding was conducted by grouping codes with semantic and thematic affinity into 12 conceptual nodes. This process involved constant comparison within and across focus groups and participant roles, allowing for the identification of shared patterns as well as differentiated emphases between teachers and school leaders.

In the final analytical cycle, these conceptual nodes were further refined and consolidated into four overarching analytical categories: conceptualization of inclusion, inclusive pedagogical practices, structural barriers, and emerging proposals. This progression supported a coherent and structured interpretation of the data while preserving the complexity of participants' perspectives. Concrete examples illustrating this progression from initial codes to conceptual nodes and final categories are provided in Appendix A, and a schematic visualization of the analytical flow is presented in Figure 1. Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively to support the visual organization of this conceptual map, not for analytical decision-making.

### **Credibility and Consistency Procedures**

Formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not applied. Instead, analytical rigor was ensured through iterative cycles of coding and recoding, systematic documentation of analytic decisions through an audit trail, reflexive memo writing throughout the analysis process, and external academic feedback through peer debriefing. These strategies support the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the analytical process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Scope and Transferability of the Study**

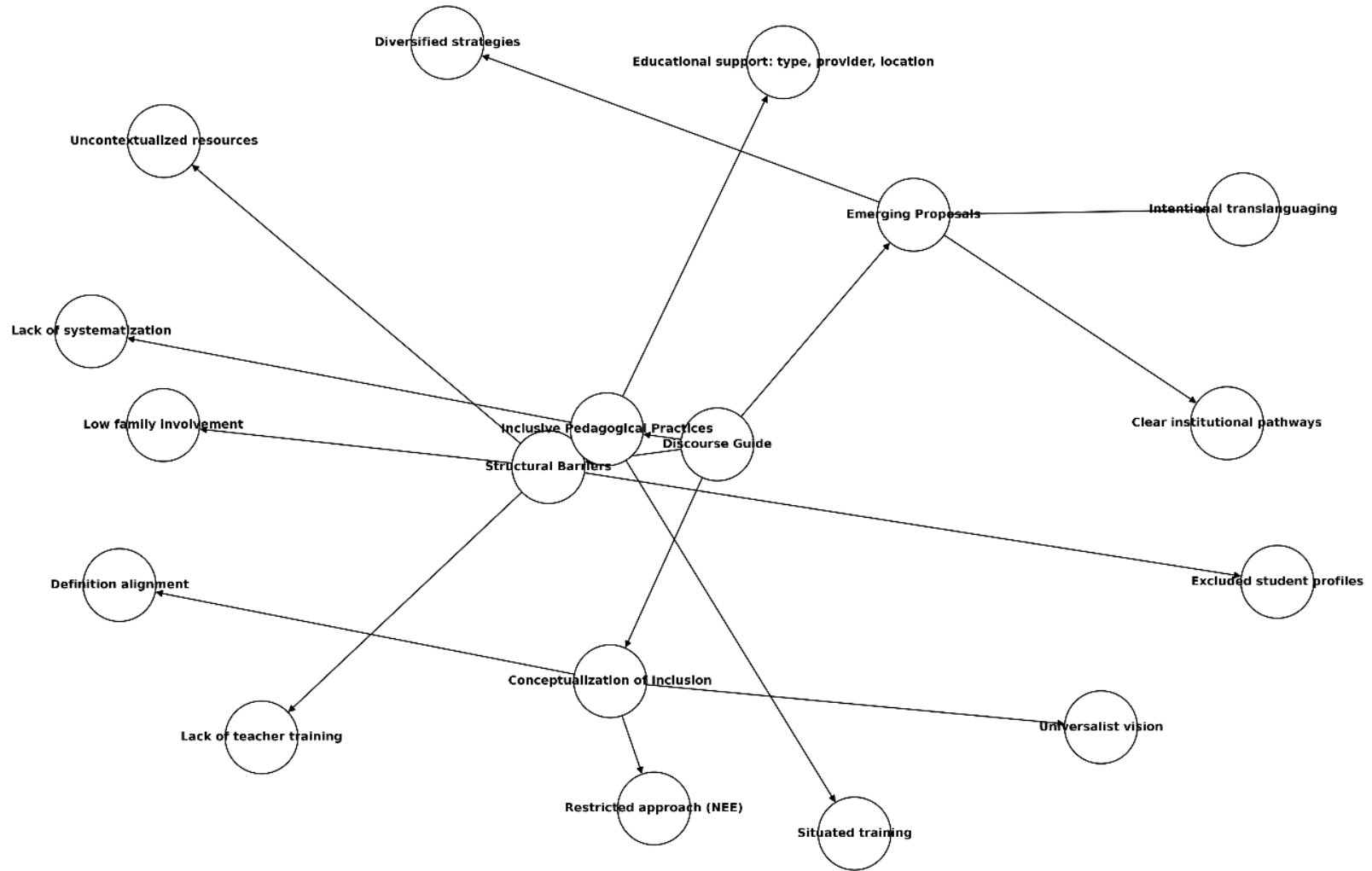
Given the qualitative multiple case study design and the relatively small sample size of 20 participants across five institutions, the study is exploratory and context specific. The aim is analytical understanding rather than statistical generalization. Transferability is supported through detailed contextual description, explicit reporting of methodological procedures, and transparency in the analytical process.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical principles governing research in the social sciences and education. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The research protocol was endorsed by the thesis supervisor and followed the institutional ethical guidelines of the university. In addition, the data collection instruments were reviewed and validated by academic peers, reinforcing their relevance and coherence with the critical and inclusive approach adopted.

Figure 1

Revised Conceptual Map: Discourse Guide → Categories and Subcategories.



Note. Author's own creation assisted by artificial intelligence.

## Findings

### Conceptualization of Inclusion

The analysis of the focus group discussions reveals the coexistence of two contrasting conceptualizations of educational inclusion that shape how bilingual education is understood and enacted in private primary schools in Santander. These conceptualizations are not merely abstract positions but are reflected in institutional discourse, pedagogical decision making, and the criteria through which support is allocated to students. The tension between these perspectives structures everyday practice and generates inconsistencies across classrooms and schools.

#### *Universalist Vision of Inclusion*

Among school leaders, a predominantly universalist and rights-based conception of inclusion emerges. In this view, inclusion is understood as a transversal principle that should guide educational practice for all students, rather than as a compensatory strategy designed exclusively for those with formally identified needs. Leaders emphasize that diversity is inherent to any educational community and that support should be conceived as a flexible and ongoing process that responds to changing student needs over time.

This position is illustrated by a school leader who framed inclusion as a fundamental right rather than a selective intervention:

If a school truly claims to be inclusive, it has to start from the idea that all students may require support at some point in their educational journey. Inclusion is not something designed only for a few specific cases; it is a right. Diversity is not an exception in the classroom, it is the norm, and schools must be prepared to respond to that reality. (School leader 4)

This discourse reflects an alignment with international frameworks that conceptualize inclusion as a structural and cultural commitment. Other school leaders expanded this view by stressing that inclusion must encompass multiple dimensions of diversity and cannot be reduced to disability alone:

When we talk about inclusion, we often reduce it to disability, but that is a very limited view. Inclusion also means recognizing social differences, linguistic diversity, and different ways of learning. All of that has to be part of what we understand as inclusive education. (School leader 2)

Taken together, these narratives position inclusion as an organizing principle of institutional culture. However, the findings indicate that this discourse operates primarily at the level of policy and leadership rhetoric and does not always translate coherently into classroom practice.

#### *Restricted Approach Focused on Special Educational Needs*

In contrast, teachers' accounts reveal a more restricted and procedural understanding of inclusion, largely centered on the identification of students with formal diagnoses of disability or special educational needs. Within this framework, inclusion is activated through documentation and official classification, which implicitly defines who is entitled to adaptations and who is not. This approach was predominant in most teacher focus groups and reflects a narrower operationalization of inclusive education.

One teacher articulated this perspective by emphasizing the centrality of diagnosis in triggering inclusive responses:

For us, inclusion usually means identifying who has a diagnosis and then working on adaptations for those students. If there is no medical report, many times nothing is done. That makes it easy to forget that other students also struggle and may need support, even if they are not officially labeled. (Teacher 6)

This diagnosis centered logic was further reinforced by teachers who described how students without formal reports often remain invisible within inclusive frameworks, despite experiencing significant barriers in bilingual classrooms:

When there is no formal diagnosis, adjustments are often not considered necessary. As a result, there are students who clearly need support, especially in English classes, but they are left aside because they do not fit into the official categories of inclusion. (Teacher 9)

These accounts suggest that inclusion becomes reduced to a set of technical procedures rather than a pedagogical orientation toward diversity. As a result, everyday teaching practices tend to privilege standardized expectations and overlook students whose difficulties are linguistic, contextual, or cumulative rather than medically defined.

### **Interpretive Tension and Institutional Fragmentation**

The coexistence of these divergent conceptualizations generates an interpretive tension that permeates institutional life. While leadership discourse promotes a broad and rights-based understanding of inclusion, classroom practices often reproduce fragmented and inconsistent approaches. This lack of shared meaning undermines the coherence of bilingual programs, which require flexibility, coordination, and collective responsibility. One school leader explicitly acknowledged this gap between discourse and practice:

There is a very attractive discourse about inclusion at the institutional level, but in practice there is a lack of alignment. Everyone ends up understanding inclusion in their own way, and that creates inconsistencies in what actually happens in classrooms. (School leader 7)

This fragmentation highlights the absence of a shared pedagogical framework capable of aligning institutional principles with everyday teaching decisions.

### **Inclusive Pedagogical Practices**

The findings show that inclusive pedagogical practices in bilingual classrooms are characterized by a tension between instructional creativity and the absence of institutional systematization. Teachers demonstrate considerable agency in adapting their teaching to diverse learners, yet these efforts remain largely individualized and unevenly distributed across classrooms.

### ***Differentiated Strategies and Pedagogical Creativity***

Teachers reported employing a wide range of strategies to address heterogeneity in English proficiency, learning pace, and classroom participation. These strategies include the use of multimodal resources, cooperative learning structures, flexible grouping, and ongoing adaptation of instructional plans. Such practices reflect an intuitive alignment with principles of instructional flexibility, even when they are not formally framed as inclusive pedagogy. One teacher described how differentiation becomes a daily necessity in bilingual classrooms:

I constantly combine games, videos, group activities, and visual materials to try to level skills up. Not everyone learns in the same way, and that becomes even more

evident in English classes. If we all do exactly the same activity, several students are immediately left behind. (Teacher 2)

Another teacher emphasized the need to modify planned instruction in response to classroom realities:

I use prints, visual resources, role playing activities, and I often change what I had planned when I realize there are many different levels in the same group. Sometimes improvisation is necessary if you really want to reach everyone. (Teacher 8)

Language flexibility also emerged as a recurring practice, particularly in moments when comprehension barriers threatened student participation:

When I see that students are getting lost, I move between English and Spanish. If I do not do that, I lose half of the class. It is not ideal, but it is necessary if participation is going to happen. (Teacher 5)

These practices illustrate a strong pedagogical commitment to inclusion at the classroom level. However, they also reveal the absence of institutional guidance that could transform individual adaptations into shared and sustainable practices.

### ***Lack of Systematization and Reliance on Individual Initiative***

Despite the presence of differentiated strategies, both teachers and school leaders highlighted the lack of clear institutional routes to support inclusive bilingual teaching. Adaptations depend largely on personal motivation and professional experience, resulting in significant variability between classrooms. One school leader explained this situation as follows:

Each teacher adapts in the way they consider best. What we are missing is a clear institutional route that connects and sustains these practices. Right now, everything depends on individual initiative. (School leader 1)

Another participant pointed to the consequences of this fragmentation for pedagogical coherence:

There is no common pedagogical line. If someone wants to adapt, they do it, but if they do not, no one guides or requires it. That creates big differences between classrooms. (School leader 3)

This reliance on individual agency limits the sustainability of inclusive practices and reinforces uneven access to support across students.

### **Structural Barriers to Sustainable Inclusion**

Beyond classroom level practices, the findings identify structural barriers that constrain the consolidation of inclusive bilingual education. These barriers are linked to professional development, instructional resources, and school-family relationships.

#### ***Fragmented Professional Development***

Participants consistently described professional development opportunities as fragmented and insufficient to address the complex intersection between bilingual education and inclusion. Training initiatives tend to be organized around isolated domains, treating language instruction and inclusive education as separate areas rather than as interdependent dimensions of classroom practice. As a result, teachers are often expected to reconcile these demands individually, without structured guidance or institutional support.

This fragmentation was articulated clearly by teachers, who pointed out that existing training programs rarely provide concrete strategies for integrating inclusive principles into bilingual instruction:

Nobody trains us to integrate inclusion with English. We have courses about English and others about inclusion, but never together. (Teacher 4)

School leaders acknowledged this gap and emphasized the absence of spaces for collective reflection on how bilingual teaching and inclusion should converge in everyday pedagogical decisions:

There is no space where teachers can really see how bilingual teaching and inclusion come together in daily practice. (School leader 1)

These accounts suggest that professional development functions as a series of parallel initiatives rather than as a coherent trajectory, limiting teachers' capacity to design inclusive bilingual learning experiences in a systematic and sustained manner.

### ***Non-Contextualized Instructional Resources***

Another structural barrier identified by participants concerns the widespread reliance on standardized instructional materials that fail to reflect students' sociocultural, linguistic, and territorial realities. These resources are often designed for urban, middle-class contexts and do not account for the lived experiences of students in rural or semi urban settings, nor for the heterogeneity of learning trajectories present in bilingual classrooms. Teachers emphasized that this lack of contextual relevance undermines both comprehension and engagement:

The books are standardized and designed for very different contexts. They do not include rural realities or cultural diversity. (Teacher 9)

Beyond issues of representation, participants noted that the disconnect between curricular content and students' everyday lives has direct implications for motivation and participation:

Sometimes the content has nothing to do with students' everyday lives, and that is very demotivating. (Teacher 7)

These findings indicate that instructional materials function not only as pedagogical tools but also as mechanisms that can either facilitate or constrain inclusion, depending on the extent to which they recognize students' cultural and linguistic realities.

### ***Limited Family Involvement and Language Barriers***

Limited family involvement emerged as a transversal constraint on inclusive bilingual education, particularly in contexts where families do not speak English. Participants described how language barriers restrict communication between schools and families, reducing opportunities for meaningful collaboration and weakening the continuity of support beyond the classroom. From the perspective of school leadership, language operates as a boundary that excludes families from school processes:

When families do not speak English, they feel excluded from the school process. (School leader 2)

Teachers further emphasized that the absence of linguistic mediation at home affects students' learning trajectories, especially in bilingual contexts where reinforcement outside school plays a critical role:

If there is no reinforcement at home because families do not understand the language, part of the effort is lost. (Teacher 6)

These accounts highlight how language barriers extend the effects of exclusion beyond the classroom, reinforcing inequalities linked to socioeconomic and cultural capital.

### **Emerging Proposals for Transformative Action**

In response to the barriers identified, participants articulated a set of proposals aimed at strengthening inclusive bilingual education through structural and institutional change. Rather than focusing on isolated adjustments, these proposals emphasize the need for coherent frameworks that align professional development, leadership, and pedagogical practice.

Teachers and school leaders consistently stressed the importance of professional development that is continuous, situated, and directly connected to classroom realities. They argued that training must move beyond generic workshops and instead engage with the specific sociolinguistic contexts in which bilingual teaching occurs:

We need practical workshops that respond to our students and our classrooms.  
(Teacher 1)

Training needs to start from our reality. (School leader 3)

Participants also highlighted the central role of institutional leadership in ensuring coherence across classrooms. Without clear institutional routes, inclusive practices remain dependent on individual initiative and are unevenly implemented:

If school management does not assume a clear route, everything stays in the hands of each teacher's personal interest. (School leader 5)

Finally, the formal recognition of translanguaging emerged as a key proposal to support inclusion in bilingual contexts. Participants argued that flexible language use should be legitimized as a pedagogical strategy rather than treated as an informal or corrective practice:

If changing languages helps include students, it should be part of the methodological route. (School leader 2)

Extended verbatim excerpts illustrating the analytical progression from initial codes to conceptual nodes and final analytical categories are presented in Appendix A.

## **Discussion**

This discussion is explicitly organized based on the study's emergent analytical categories:

(1) *Between Inclusive Rhetoric and Fragmented Practice*; (2) *Emerging Strategies: Potential and Challenges*; (3) *Structural Barriers: Political Economy of Bilingualism*; and (4) *Transformative Potential: Routes and Leadership*. These categories integrate the qualitative findings from role-differentiated focus groups (teachers vs. school leaders) with existing literature on inclusion in bilingual programs, revealing tensions between normative discourse and diagnostic-centered practices, alongside opportunities for contextualized policy transformation in Santander's private primary schools.

### **Between Inclusive Rhetoric and Fragmented Practice**

The findings confirm a persistent structural tension between inclusive rhetoric, embedded in policy documents, institutional projects, and official statements, and the practices enacted in school settings. This tension is reflected in the coexistence of a broad notion of inclusion, endorsed by

international benchmarks such as UNESCO (2023), which understands diversity as a constitutive principle of educational communities, alongside a narrower and more operational approach that reduces inclusion to students with clearly identified diagnoses or special educational needs (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Within the institutions examined, school leaders tend to align with a universalist and rights-based discourse of inclusion, positioning diversity as a transversal principle and inclusion as an organizing axis of institutional culture. However, this orientation does not consistently permeate pedagogical enactment. The findings indicate that classroom-level responses frequently remain anchored in a corrective logic, where support is activated primarily through diagnosis-based mechanisms. This conceptual gap between institutional discourse and pedagogical practice is not isolated. Research conducted in Latin American contexts has shown that inclusion is often instrumentalized as a formal requirement linked to accreditation processes, while lacking coherent translation into everyday teaching strategies (Montes Serrano & Tineo Quispe, 2023).

In the specific context of private bilingual programs in Santander, this fragmentation becomes particularly visible. Although public policy promotes English as a tool for mobility and competitiveness (MEN, 2015), implementation may reinforce selective logics that privilege students with more homogeneous educational trajectories, greater cultural capital, and stronger family support. This dynamic aligns with the notion of stratified bilingualism, in which English operates as symbolic capital and contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies when equity-oriented supports and territorial contextualization are limited (Bettney, 2023; Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023).

The risk of this gap is twofold. On the one hand, narratives of the “inclusive school” may be consolidated for institutional legitimacy and enrolment purposes. On the other hand, exclusionary dynamics can remain obscured under normalizing practices and segmented student profiles. As Ainscow (2020) cautions, the absence of coherence between discourse and practice risks turning inclusion into a slogan rather than an ethical and political project. These findings underscore the need to conceptualize inclusion as a collective and organizational process that moves beyond individualized adaptation. From an inclusive pedagogy perspective, equitable participation depends on planned flexibility and shared instructional routines that support all learners, rather than limited remediation targeted at a small subset of students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

### **Emerging Strategies: Potential and Challenges**

Despite the structural tensions identified, the findings also reveal significant pedagogical agency and creativity emerging from teaching practice in bilingual contexts. Teachers frequently implement diversified strategies to address heterogeneous levels of English proficiency and varied learning trajectories, including multimodal resources, cooperative dynamics, play-based activities, and flexible task design. Interpreted through an inclusive pedagogy lens, these practices reflect efforts to broaden access and participation by adjusting content, processes, and modes of engagement to diverse learner needs.

At the same time, the analysis shows that these strategies tend to emerge as individualized and fragmented responses rather than as part of coherent institutional frameworks. The absence of systematic backing, shared guidelines, and sustained professional learning limits their continuity and scalability. This reliance on personal initiative reinforces what Ainscow and Dyson (2016) describe as the paradox of inclusion: when inclusive practice depends primarily on individual commitment, it becomes fragile and vulnerable to staff turnover, uneven training opportunities, and weak pedagogical leadership.

Within this context, translanguaging emerges as a practice with considerable transformative potential. Interpreted through social justice and political economy of language perspectives, strategic

language alternation functions not only as linguistic scaffolding but also as a mechanism for sustaining participation among students who might otherwise be marginalized. Translanguaging challenges monolingual ideologies and aligns with broader debates that frame language education as a right rather than a barrier (Bhasin & Roman, 2023; García & Wei, 2018; Li & Garcia, 2022).

However, the findings also indicate that the potential of translanguaging is constrained by structural factors, including limited training for intentional design, the absence of clear methodological guidance, and standardized assessment and curricular frameworks that may discourage language alternation. As Bettney (2023) argues, bilingualism imposed in homogeneous ways and disconnected from sociolinguistic realities can become a mechanism of symbolic exclusion. Pedagogical innovation, therefore, is unlikely to be sustainable without institutional architectures that define methodological routes, support situated professional learning and legitimize transformative practices within inclusion-oriented bilingual education policies.

### **Structural Barriers: Political Economy of Bilingualism**

Beyond classroom-level challenges, the findings highlight structural barriers embedded in the political economy of language that constrain inclusive bilingual education in private institutions located in peripheral regions such as Santander. These barriers are closely linked to how bilingualism is institutionally organized, resourced, and legitimized within broader policy frameworks.

A central barrier concerns fragmented professional development. Training opportunities frequently separate bilingual education from inclusion, limiting opportunities to address their intersection in contextually grounded ways. This fragmentation restricts teachers' capacity to integrate inclusive principles into bilingual instruction and reinforces divisions between linguistic competence and educational equity. Similar patterns have been documented in Latin American contexts, where bilingual programs prioritize standardized proficiency goals while remaining disconnected from sociocultural and territorial realities (Gómez, 2024).

A second constraint relates to the widespread use of standardized instructional materials designed for urban and middle-class contexts. Such materials often obscure cultural, linguistic, and territorial diversity, weakening connections between curricular content and students' lived experiences. Under these conditions, bilingual education risks functioning as an access filter that privileges students with greater cultural and family support, rather than expanding opportunities equitably (Bettney, 2023).

A further barrier concerns weak school–family articulation, intensified by language gaps. In communities where families do not speak English, participation in school processes is often limited, reducing continuity in learning support and undermining shared educational responsibility. Without linguistic and cultural mediation, family involvement becomes uneven, compromising the sustainability of inclusive strategies in bilingual contexts (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023).

These barriers should not be understood as isolated technical shortcomings, but as manifestations of broader structural conditions. English, promoted through policy as a vehicle for global competitiveness (MEN, 2015), operates as a stratification mechanism when implemented without explicit social justice criteria and territorial adaptation. Under these conditions, bilingual education risks reproducing inequalities in access, participation, and school success rather than contributing to their reduction.

### **Transformative Potential: Routes and Leadership**

The proposals articulated by participants can be interpreted as indicators of institutional awareness regarding the limits of current models of bilingual education rather than as immediate solutions to structural constraints. These proposals point to underlying tensions in governance,

professional learning, and pedagogical coherence, and they highlight the conditions under which inclusive bilingual education could move beyond fragmented and individualized responses. From an analytical perspective, their relevance lies not in their novelty, but in what they reveal about the organizational and leadership arrangements required to sustain inclusion over time.

First, the emphasis placed on situated and continuous professional development reflects a recognition that inclusion cannot be operationalized through generic or episodic training. Instead, the findings suggest that teachers and school leaders perceive professional learning as effective only when it is embedded in local sociolinguistic realities and directly connected to classroom practice. This interpretation aligns with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize inclusion as an organizational process rather than an individual competence, requiring collective learning structures that support shared understandings and pedagogical coherence (Ainscow, 2020). In this sense, professional development functions as a mediating space where institutional discourse can be translated into pedagogical action.

Second, the recurrent reference to leadership and institutional routes highlights the centrality of governance in stabilizing inclusive practices. The findings suggest that, in the absence of clearly articulated pathways, pedagogical responses remain contingent on individual disposition, resulting in uneven implementation across classrooms. Interpreted analytically, this pattern underscores the role of distributed leadership not merely as administrative coordination, but as a mechanism for aligning values, expectations, and practices across the school. Inclusive pedagogical leadership, therefore, emerges as a condition for transforming isolated initiatives into sustained institutional policy, consistent with arguments that link inclusion to internal coherence and normative support (Jaramillo Cárdenas, 2023).

Finally, the prominence of flexible language practices within participants' proposals can be understood as part of a broader reconfiguration of how bilingualism is enacted in contexts marked by linguistic diversity and inequality. Rather than treating language strictly as a technical medium of instruction, the findings suggest an emerging recognition of its role in participation, belonging, and access to learning. Interpreted through social justice and political economy lenses, this orientation signals a shift away from monolingual norms toward more inclusive understandings of language use in education. However, the analysis also indicates that such shifts remain vulnerable in the absence of institutional validation, professional preparation, and alignment with assessment and curricular frameworks.

These interpretive insights suggest that the transformative potential identified in the study is less about specific pedagogical techniques and more about the organizational conditions that enable coherence between discourse, practice, and policy. Without sustained leadership, structured professional learning, and explicit institutional routes, inclusive bilingual education is likely to remain dependent on individual agency rather than consolidated as a collective and durable educational project.

### **Implications for Education Policy**

The findings indicate the need to advance toward public policies that explicitly integrate bilingual education with principles of inclusion and social justice. To enhance clarity and usability for policymakers, school leaders, and educators, the implications are organized according to their level of implementation and time frame.

#### ***Immediate Institutional Actions***

At the school level, inclusive bilingual practices should be systematized through clear internal routes and shared guidelines. This includes moving beyond diagnosis-based criteria for identifying

barriers to participation, clarifying responsibilities for in-class support, and documenting reasonable adjustments consistently. Translanguaging should be formally recognized within institutional methodological guidance and aligned with formative assessment practices, ensuring that language alternation is treated as a legitimate and intentional pedagogical strategy.

### ***Medium-Term Professional Development Actions***

At the institutional and network levels, professional development should evolve toward contextualized and continuous training trajectories that integrate bilingualism and inclusion. These trajectories should be grounded in local sociolinguistic realities and focus on practical design and implementation of inclusive bilingual instruction, including differentiation, multimodal scaffolding, and planned translanguaging. Collaborative formats involving teachers and school leaders are essential to promote shared understandings and coherence across classrooms.

### ***Long-Term Systemic Actions***

At the policy level, national and regional bilingualism frameworks should be revised to explicitly incorporate Universal Design for Learning and translanguaging as enabling practices within equity-oriented approaches. Curriculum guidance, materials selection, and assessment frameworks must be aligned so that inclusive language practices are not penalized. System-level monitoring mechanisms should integrate equity indicators examining access, participation, and learning trajectories across diverse student profiles and territorial contexts.

## **Conclusions**

This study examined how educational inclusion is conceptualized and enacted within private bilingual primary schools in Santander, Colombia, revealing persistent tensions between institutional discourse and everyday pedagogical practice. The findings indicate that inclusion is frequently articulated at the level of policy and leadership rhetoric, while classroom implementation remains fragmented and uneven, shaped by diagnosis-based logic, individual initiative, and structural constraints. These dynamics underscore the difficulty of translating inclusive principles into coherent practice in bilingual contexts marked by linguistic diversity and social inequality.

The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how leadership structures, professional development arrangements, material conditions, and the political economy of language intersect to shape inclusive bilingual education. Rather than attributing gaps between discourse and practice to individual shortcomings, the analysis highlights the organizational and systemic dimensions that condition teachers' capacity to enact inclusion consistently. In doing so, it advances understanding of inclusion as a collective, institutional process rather than a set of isolated pedagogical adjustments.

Given its qualitative multiple case study design and the limited number of participating institutions, the findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalization. Nevertheless, the study offers analytically grounded insights that may inform institutional decision-making and policy reflection in similar bilingual education contexts, particularly those characterized by structural inequality, peripheral location, and increasing pressure to align bilingualism with global competitiveness agendas.

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