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Religious Education and Critical Pedagogies: A Systematic Review of Epistemological Configurations and Tensions (2020–2025)

Educación religiosa y pedagogías críticas: Revisión sistemática de las configuraciones y tensiones epistemológicas (2020-2025)

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Abstract

This research aimed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the scientific literature published from 2020 to 2025 on the link between religious education in secondary schools and critical pedagogies focused on civic education. To this end, a narrative systematic review considering qualitative interpretive principles was conducted using 30 publications selected from SciELO, Dialnet and ScienceDirect based on inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as methodological quality criteria. The results showed the existence of six thematic axes, four pedagogical models, and four epistemological conflicts. It can be concluded that there is a shift from the doctrinal approach to those based on dialogue and pluralism, leading to social justice and democratic participation. The conclusion is made that this connection makes students more autonomous, responsible, and critical in religious education at the level of secondary education nowadays.

Keywords: religious education, secondary education, social justice.

Resumen

El presente trabajo tuvo como fin la síntesis crítica de la producción científica publicada entre 2020 y 2025 en el ámbito educativo sobre educación secundaria de religión y su relación con las pedagogías críticas orientadas hacia la ciudadanía. Para ello se realizó una revisión sistematizada narrativa, de enfoque cualitativo-interpretativo en la que se integraron 30 artículos seleccionados a partir de SciELO, Dialnet y ScienceDirect a partir de criterios de inclusión, exclusión y calidad metodológica se identificaron para realizar un minucioso análisis. El análisis dio lugar a seis ejes temáticos, cuatro configuraciones pedagógicas y cuatro tensiones epistemológicas; se empezó a registrar una transición con modelos doctrinales hacia propuestas que abren vías analíticas como el diálogo, el pluralismo, la justicia social o la participación democrática. La citada relación conduce a la conclusión de que esta articulación potencia la autonomía estudiantil, la reflexión ética y la reflexión crítica en el contexto escolar.

Palabras clave: educación religiosa, educación secundaria, justicia social.

Introduction

School-based religious education must move beyond the mere transmission of doctrine if it is to become a space for ethical reflection, intercultural dialogue, and the formation of critical citizenship. In plural societies, and particularly in plural societies marked by inequality, Lilja et al. (2023) argue that this challenge

calls for cultivating meaning within the educational process itself, while Hammer and Lenz (2024) note that critical pedagogies foster both an analysis of lived reality and an examination of power relations. Such approaches support the development of students' meta-reflective, reflective, ethical, and political awareness in the face of inequality, exclusion, and domination. Along these lines, Anthony and Lourdunathan (2025) contend that critical citizenship rests on dialogue, respect for diversity, social justice, and responsible civic participation in democratic life.

The most recent literature maps out three broad lines of inquiry. The first examines the growing diversity of religious education models: Fontdevila et al. (2024) distinguish confessional, culturalist, and axiological approaches; Milerski and Zieliński (2023) explore the tensions among state neutrality, religious pluralism, and schooling; Bråten and Skeie (2020) emphasize the contribution of curricular reform to the construction of democratic learning; and Gross and Rutland (2023) examine classroom pedagogical practices and their role in shaping teacher agency and confessional pluralism. The second line of inquiry proposes integrating critical pedagogies with religious education so as to strengthen the analysis of power relations, dialogue, argumentation, and critical interpretation. The third connects religious education to the formation of critical citizenship; indeed, Anthony and Lourdunathan (2025), Boehme (2024), and Turčan et al. (2025) suggest that this approach foregrounds social justice, democratic participation, and the development of metacognitive, communicative, and cooperative competencies.

Recent scholarship also reveals two notable gaps. The first concerns the limited integration of religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship: Beltrán (2020) observes that far more research exists in other educational areas, while Lindström and Samuelsson (2022) confirm that studies linking religious education to democratic formation and critical thinking remain scarce. The second gap relates to the variability of the institutional frameworks and policy contexts within which religious education is embedded. Although the contributions of Tekin and Ay (2024), Ackroyd (2025), and McDonnell (2023) are noteworthy, they remain partial and disconnected from one another, underscoring the need for a synthesis capable of bringing together religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship.

In light of these gaps, the study addresses the following research question: To what extent do the secondary-level religious education models documented in the literature indexed between 2020 and 2025 incorporate principles of critical pedagogy for the formation of critical citizenship, and under what pedagogical, curricular, and contextual conditions does such an articulation become viable?

The overall aim of this study is to critically synthesize the academic production indexed between 2020 and 2025 on religious education models in secondary schooling, examining the extent to which they incorporate principles of critical pedagogy and identifying the configurations, tensions, and gaps that characterize this field. The study brings together evidence on religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship through an interpretive framework that identifies six thematic axes, four pedagogical configurations, and a set of epistemological tensions. As a contribution to the field, it proposes the Epistemic-Political Laboratory model to guide future research, curriculum design, teacher training, and educational policy in secondary education.

Methodology

This study was carried out as a narrative systematic review guided by a qualitative-interpretive approach, aimed at analyzing the scientific evidence on religious education models and their relationship to critical pedagogies oriented toward the formation of critical citizenship in secondary education. The process encompassed formulating the research question, conducting the bibliographic search, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, assessing methodological quality, and producing a narrative synthesis of the studies reviewed.

The search was conducted in SciELO, Dialnet, and ScienceDirect using Spanish- and English-language descriptors related to religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship, combined through Boolean operators. Records were organized in a Microsoft Excel matrix, and duplicates were removed by comparing authors, titles, publication year, and source. Ultimately, 30 studies meeting the established criteria were selected for analysis.

Inclusion criteria

a) Studies published between 2020 and 2025, in order to capture the most recent scientific evidence.

b) Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies, systematic reviews, narrative reviews, and conceptual works directly related to the object of study.

c) Studies focused on school-based religious education, religious education models, critical pedagogies, critical citizenship, religious pluralism, social justice, or ethical and civic formation processes within educational settings.

d) Articles published in Spanish or English with full-text availability.

Exclusion criteria

a) Editorials, reviews, opinion pieces, book chapters, conference proceedings, and non–peer-reviewed documents.

b) Studies whose object of inquiry addressed religious phenomena unrelated to educational processes or civic formation.

c) Studies that did not provide empirical results, conceptual development, or evidence relevant to the study's objectives.

d) Documents whose full text was not available for review.

Search strategy

To optimize information retrieval, Boolean operators (AND and OR) were applied using the following search strings:

- "religious education" AND "critical pedagogy" AND "critical citizenship"
- "educación religiosa" AND "pedagogías críticas" AND "ciudadanía crítica"
- "religious education" AND "social justice" AND "secondary education"
- "worldview education" OR "religious pluralism" AND "critical thinking"
- "formación ciudadana" AND "educación religiosa escolar" AND "pensamiento crítico"
- "religious education" AND "democratic education" AND "citizenship"

Study selection process

Study selection proceeded in four stages: identification of records through the search strategy applied across the three databases; removal of duplicates and screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords; full-text review to verify the inclusion and exclusion criteria; and the final constitution of the corpus of 30 studies incorporated into the narrative synthesis. The traceability of this process is presented in the flowchart.

Methodological rationale for corpus selection

The documentary corpus was selected on the basis of each study's thematic relevance. Research addressing religious education models and related topics, such as teacher training, intercultural education, social justice, and critical thinking, was included whenever it contributed to the analysis of the phenomenon under study. All documents were assessed against the same criteria of eligibility, methodological quality, and thematic relevance, which made it possible to construct a narrative synthesis and interpret the main pedagogical configurations and epistemological tensions identified.

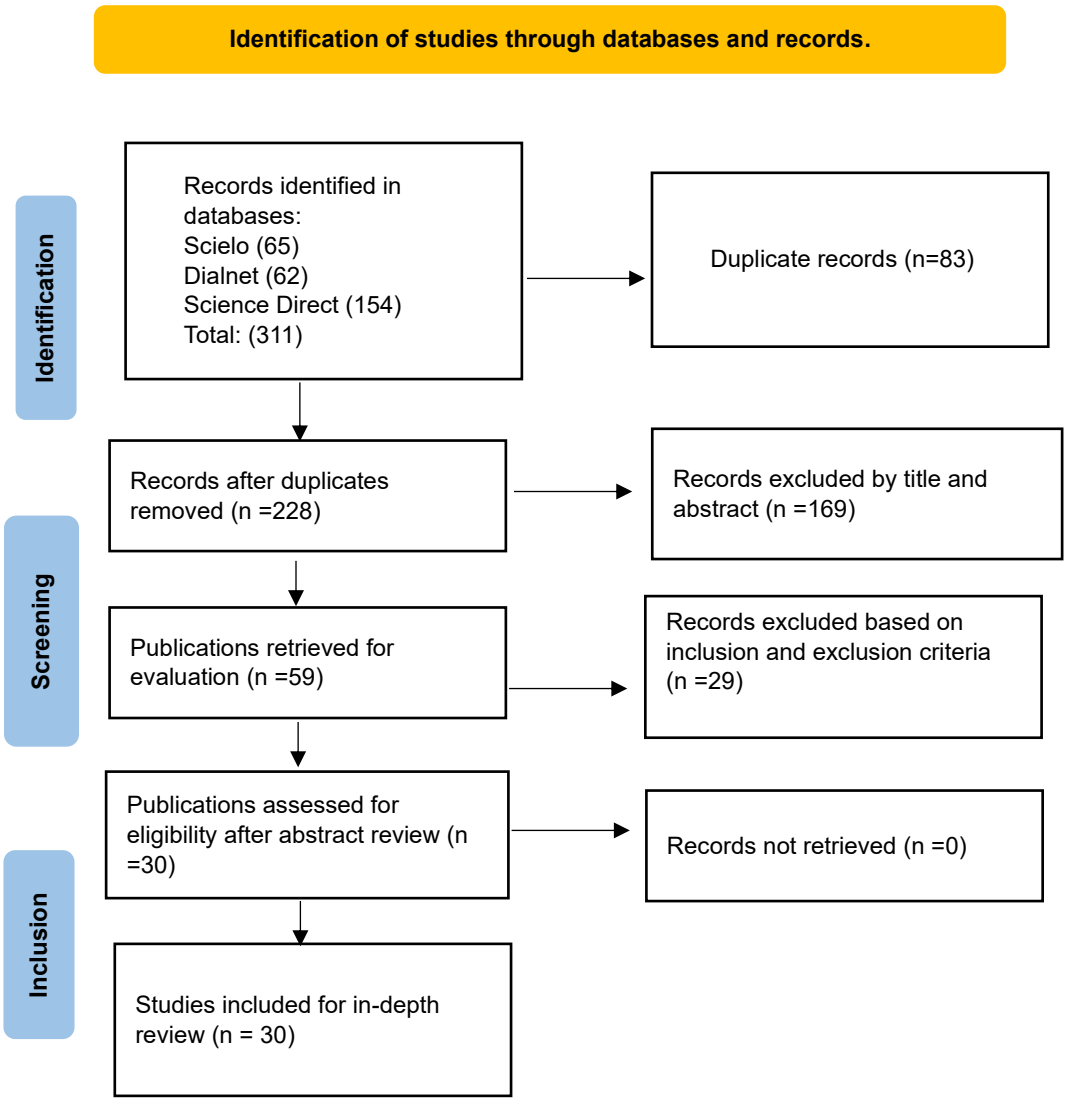
Methodological quality assessment

Before the evidence was integrated, each study was assessed using a matrix adapted to its research type, taking into account methodological coherence, analytical consistency, and the robustness of its contributions. The evidence was then integrated through an inductive thematic analysis that made it possible to identify the axes, pedagogical configurations, and epistemological tensions underpinning the narrative synthesis.

Evidence extraction, integration, and synthesis

The evidence was organized using an extraction matrix capturing the main characteristics of each study. It was then integrated through narrative synthesis and thematic interpretation, identifying patterns, differences, and relationships that made it possible to structure the review's thematic axes, pedagogical configurations, and epistemological tensions.

Figure 1. *Flowchart of bibliographic sources.*



Results

The results present the characterization of the studies included in the review, as well as the approaches identified regarding the modernization of public management and the digital transformation of the State. The information is organized descriptively to facilitate its analysis and interpretation.

Table 1. *Characterization Matrix of the Included Studies.*

Author(s)	Title	Methodology	Country	Year	Database
Saada	Educating for global citizenship in religious education: Islamic perspective	Qualitative	Western countries	2023	ScienceDirect
Ramos Hoyos	Religious Education and Critical Thinking from the Standpoint of Student Figurations	Qualitative	Colombia	2023	Dialnet
Guanilo et al.	Moral Insolvency: Theoretical Bases for Presidential Vacancy	Qualitative	Peru	2024	SciELO
Moser & Abramovich	How Six Religious Pedagogies Can Inform ACRL Threshold Concepts for IL Instruction Training	Qualitative	United States	2023	ScienceDirect
Hernández	Reasoning Beliefs: A Proposal for Developing Critical Thinking through Argumentation in School Religious Education	Qualitative	Colombia	2021	Dialnet
Quintana Rubio	Religious Pedagogy and Values Development in Adolescents: A Systematic Review	Qualitative	Peru	2025	SciELO
Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei	Higher education English language professors' conceptualisation of peace...	Qualitative	Iran	2023	ScienceDirect
Meza Díaz	What Critical Pedagogy and Humanism Are We Talking About When We Talk About the New Mexican School?	Qualitative	Mexico	2025	Dialnet
Martínez Quinteros et al.	Critical and Transformative Pedagogy of the Social and Educational Reality of Third-Level Students	Qualitative	Ecuador	2025	SciELO
Ward-Seidel & Bentley	Teacher preparation needs critical consciousness	Qualitative	United States	2025	ScienceDirect
Zapata	Approaches to School Religious Education in Latin	Qualitative	Latin America	2024	Dialnet

	America for a Spirituality of Listening from Francis and His Global Educational Pact				
Moran et al.	Pastoral Practice and Hermeneutics in Religious Education	Qualitative	Ecuador	2025	SciELO
Waluyo et al.	Bridging secular and religious perspectives: Gender awareness in language learning...	Mixed methods	Indonesia	2025	ScienceDirect
Alarcón-Alvear & Novoa-Rojas	Toward a Pedagogy of Meaning: The Development of Spiritual Intelligence in the Religion Class	Qualitative	Chile	2025	Dialnet
Mulatillo Ruiz et al.	Digital Educational Resources and Teaching Capacity in the Area of Religious Education	Quantitative	Peru	2024	SciELO
Magill	"I Can't believe I said that": An analysis of preservice teacher ideological transformation...	Qualitative	United States	2023	ScienceDirect
Odiaga Ríos et al.	Dignified Societies Based on Religious Formation	Qualitative	Peru	2023	Dialnet
Melo Rosero et al.	Emotional Intelligence and Student Performance: A Case in the Field of Religious Education	Quantitative	Ecuador	2024	SciELO
Saoke et al.	The christian religious education teachers' attitudes toward the five-stage lesson plan framework in Kenya...	Quantitative	Kenya	2023	ScienceDirect
Flanagan	'Nobody ever told you, "actually, this feels great"': Religion informed sexual health education...	Qualitative	Northern Ireland	2024	ScienceDirect
García-Segura et al.	Young People Facing Cultural and Religious Diversity in Secondary Education	Quantitative	Spain	2023	SciELO
Iheduru-Anderson & Waite	Decolonizing nursing education: Reflecting on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed	Qualitative	United States	2024	ScienceDirect

Pérez Ortiz & Jiménez Fernández	School Textbooks and Their Religious Influence: A Bibliographic Description	Qualitative	Spain	2024	SciELO
Kardaş İşler	Dealing with controversial issues in primary school classroom interactions in social studies courses	Qualitative	Internatio nal	2025	ScienceDirect
Holmos-Flores et al.	Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice as an Educational Approach to Addressing Inequalities	Quantitative	Peru	2023	SciELO
Meidl et al. (2023)	Examining how power is used in instructor feedback to preservice teachers to encourage asset-based thinking	Qualitative	United States	2023	ScienceDirect
López Gándara & Rendón-Romero	Critical approaches to English language teacher education: A narrative inquiry...	Mixed methods	Spain	2023	ScienceDirect
Cananau et al.	Critical thinking in preparation for student teachers' professional practice: A case study...	Qualitative	Sweden	2025	ScienceDirect
Shah	Privileged discourses, teacher agency and alternative subjectivities: Analyzing Janus-faced character...	Qualitative	Pakistan	2023	ScienceDirect
D'Agostino & Asadullah	Faith-based education and development: Opportunities, challenges, and controversies	Qualitative	Global	2025	ScienceDirect

The characterization of the corpus reveals unmistakable diversity, both methodological and geographic. Qualitative studies predominate strongly, conducted primarily in Latin America and Europe, though contributions from Asia, Africa, and North America are also present. This heterogeneity suggests that interest in the relationship among religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship extends well beyond any single national context and is emerging as a research topic of growing international reach.

Table 2. *Thematic axes identified in the articulation of religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship (2020–2025).*

Thematic axis	Representative authors	Summary of findings
Religious education oriented toward critical thinking	Hernández (2021); Ramos (2023); Quintana (2025); Alarcón-Alvear &	Religious education moves beyond doctrinal transmission when it integrates argumentation, critical

	Novoa-Rojas (2025); Odiaga et al. (2023)	reflection, hermeneutic interpretation, and ethical formation.
Critical pedagogies and educational transformation	Meza (2025); Martínez et al. (2025); Holmos-Flores et al. (2023); Iheduru-Anderson & Waite (2024); Ward-Seidel & Bentley (2025)	Critical pedagogical practice fosters social awareness, challenges power, and cultivates democratizing subjects.
Religious pluralism, diversity, and interculturality	Saada (2023); García-Segura et al. (2023); Waluyo et al. (2025); Flanagan (2024); D'Agostino & Asadullah (2025); Zapata (2024)	Religious education moves toward recognizing diversity, fostering dialogue among worldviews, and supporting democratic coexistence.
Teacher training, pedagogical innovation, and critical citizenship	Mulatillo Ruiz et al. (2024); Magill (2023); Meidl et al. (2023); López & Rendón-Romero (2023); Cananau et al. (2025); Saoke et al. (2023)	Teacher training is crucial for integrating dialogic methodologies, critical thinking, digital resources, and inclusive narratives.
Power, social justice, and the construction of citizenship	Shah (2023); Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei (2023); Kardaş (2025); Holmos-Flores et al. (2023); Iheduru-Anderson & Waite, (2024)	Critical citizenship develops when education adopts a critical stance toward power, promotes social justice, and fosters democratic participation.
Gaps between the prescribed curriculum and classroom practice as a persistent problem	Moran et al. (2025); Moser & Abramovich (2023); Pérez & Jiménez (2024); Alarcón-Alvear & Novoa-Rojas (2025); D'Agostino & Asadullah (2025)	The evidence points to a shift toward hermeneutic, dialogic, and critical approaches that integrate ethics, pluralism, and citizenship.

The synthesis of the studies led to the identification of six thematic axes reflecting common patterns in the relationship between religious education and critical pedagogies. The evidence indicates that the incorporation of critical pedagogies depends on the presence of certain curricular changes, the role played by teachers, and the institutional and sociocultural conditions that shape teaching practice.

Discussion

Axis I. Religious education oriented toward critical thinking

The evidence reviewed indicates that religious education proves more formative when it moves away from a purely doctrinal logic and centers instead on processes of interpretation, argumentation, and ethical reflection. Hernández (2021), Ramos (2023), and Quintana (2025) find that critical thinking is not at odds with religious instruction; rather, it can reinforce it by enabling students to examine beliefs, values, and social issues from a reflective standpoint. Even so, the central tension lies in overcoming transmissive practices that continue to persist. In this sense, religious education fosters critical citizenship to the extent that it cultivates subjects capable of deliberating, interpreting, and acting ethically within a plural world (Alarcón-Alvear & Novoa-Rojas, 2025; Odiaga et al., 2023).

Axis II. Critical pedagogies and educational transformation

The studies by Meza (2025), Martínez et al. (2025), and Holmos-Flores et al. (2023) support the claim that critical pedagogies drive a shift away from the mere reproduction of content and toward the problematization of educational and social reality. Although these inquiries unfold in disparate contexts, they share a common recognition of the potential that teachers and students hold for positioning themselves in relation to inequality, power relations, and forms of exclusion. The key difference lies in emphasis: some

studies prioritize institutional transformation, while others place greater weight on social awareness and pedagogical agency. Taken together, these studies confirm that religious education can be reconciled with critical pedagogies when it is capable of fostering participatory action and a critical reading of the world (Iheduru-Anderson & Waite, 2024; Ward-Seidel & Bentley, 2025).

Axis III. Religious pluralism, diversity, and interculturality

The evidence suggests that religious education cannot be reduced to promoting a single tradition in culturally diverse societies. As Saada (2023), García-Segura et al. (2023), Waluyo et al. (2025), and Flanagan (2024) point out, recognizing religious, cultural, and intercultural diversity is essential for achieving democratic coexistence. Their contributions converge on the idea that dialogue among worldviews strengthens mutual understanding and reduces exclusionary stances. Even so, the tension between religious identity and pluralist openness persists. From this premise follows a conception of critical citizenship in which religious education teaches coexistence, deliberation, and the recognition of difference without setting aside one's own convictions (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025; Zapata, 2024).

Axis IV. Teacher training, pedagogical innovation, and critical citizenship

Professional teacher training emerges as a key element enabling religious education to integrate dialogic methodologies, innovative resources, and inclusive practices. Mulatillo et al. (2024), Magill (2023), and Meidl et al. (2023) agree that teachers do more than deliver content; they also mediate experiences of reflection, dialogue, and participation. These studies are complemented by attention to the pedagogical dimension alongside digital resource techniques and inclusive orientations. As López and Rendón-Romero (2023) highlight, the resulting tension stems from the gap between the teacher training that is expected and the traditional practices that still endure. By extension, critical citizenship depends on teachers trained to connect religious knowledge, critical thinking, and social reality (Cananau et al., 2024; Saoke et al., 2023).

Axis V. Power, social justice, and the construction of citizenship

The evidence uncovered by Ramezanzadeh and Rezaei (2023) and by Shah (2023) positions critical citizenship as the product of educational processes that make it possible to problematize power, inequality, and social justice. Both studies agree that education is never neutral, since it can either reproduce hierarchies or serve as a democratic space for transformation. Iheduru-Anderson and Waite (2024) note that some contributions emphasize participation and social justice, while others focus more deeply on problematizing institutional and cultural structures. What emerges from this convergence is highly relevant for religious education, not only because its civic contribution does not remain at the level of abstract values, but because it also helps educate individuals in the critical reading of reality and their own involvement in transforming it (Holmos-Flores et al., 2023; Kardaş, 2025).

Axis VI. Gaps between the prescribed curriculum and classroom practice as a persistent problem

The studies by Moran et al. (2025) and Moser and Abramovich (2023) trace a shift away from cognitivist, transmission-based confessional models toward hermeneutic, dialogic, and critical approaches. Alarcón-Alvear and Novoa-Rojas (2025) and D'Agostino and Asadullah (2025) suggest that this shift does not amount to abandoning the religious dimension but rather redirects it toward ethics, pluralism, and citizenship. These contributions converge in holding that interpretation, deliberation, and the recognition of diversity enrich the educational significance of religion within the school setting. Tension arises, however, where closed worldviews persist in the face of increasingly plural sociocultural contexts. For this reason, the review suggests that religious education builds critical citizenship precisely when identity, dialogue, and democratic responsibility come together (Pérez & Jiménez, 2024).

Taken together, this discussion shows that religious education can contribute to critical citizenship when it moves beyond the merely doctrinal and connects with dialogue, interpretation, pluralism, social

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justice, and teacher training. Its transformative potential, however, remains contingent on the pedagogical and institutional conditions that make sustained critical practice possible.

Conclusions

This review confirms that the connection between religious education, critical pedagogies, and critical citizenship constitutes a field still in the process of consolidation, one whose defining features include a shift toward pedagogies of dialogue, ethical reflection, pluralism, and democratic participation. Engaging with the evidence made it possible to identify six thematic axes, four pedagogical configurations, and the main epistemological tensions at play, indicating that the formation of critical citizenship is conditioned by pedagogical, curricular, and institutional factors alike. The principal outcome of this research is the proposal of the Epistemic-Political Laboratory conceptual model, which brings both fields together within a common interpretive framework. Among the study's limitations are its restriction to studies indexed in SciELO, Dialnet, and ScienceDirect between 2020 and 2025, the conceptual heterogeneity of the corpus, and the predominance of qualitative studies. Recommended directions for future research include empirical, comparative, and longitudinal studies, as well as the development of indicators capable of measuring critical citizenship and epistemic literacy.

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