

Chiaroscuros in Curricular Innovations: Between Desire and Reality

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on curricular innovation and competencies as the dominant discourse in present-day curricular reform, as well as on the political and educational implications for educating students. In addition, we point out some of the challenges in the appropriation of innovations and competencies within the framework of cultural and ethnic diversity.

Curricular Innovations

In far-reaching curricular reforms, the term *innovation* has been the key factor associated with designing and applying new curricular models and with setting alternative teaching methods in motion.

The incorporation of particular innovative models (curricular flexibility, education based on competencies, learning-centered curriculum, incorporating information technology into teaching, among others) derived not only from the apparent need for change and improvement in educational quality, but was based on a series of international trends in the area of educational reform, spurred by policies emanating from national and international organizations both from the educational sector as well as from the financial-business spheres. They were frankly dependent on proposals geared to evaluating the quality, certification and accreditation, or evaluation linked to financing education (Barrón and Valenzuela, 2013).

One could state that there is no single meaning related to educational innovation, as well as recognize a lack of theoretical framework sufficiently developed and shared. Not all changes and improvements necessarily mean educational innovation, so one would have to ask: under what conditions or under what circumstances should educational innovation take place? For example, there are changes that percolate up from below, from those involved in the educational system and prepared to assimilate the proposals, which contrast with changes occurring through decisions emanating from a policy adopted: a central, regional or local government authority that decides to adopt a new idea and dictates the regulations and instructions needed to carry them out. The characteristics defining an educational model as innovative in one country may not be such for another. Consolidating it requires obtaining effective results in attaining its goals, in addition to enjoying social recognition and being legitimated in its field. Despite the fact, we have continued researching the meaning and understanding of the concept of innovation, we continue debating the implications it has in education and society.

Ever since the eighties, Díaz Barriga A. (1988) pointed out that the meaning of *curricular innovation* had been trivialized by limiting it to technological changes in curriculum, leaving aside discussion on the latter's social meaning, as well as associating it with the design and application of various curricular models. As a result of the expansion of higher education in Mexico in the seventies, there was a marked interest in Mexico for innovation for the purpose of responding to marketplace demand.



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In the framework of present-day scenarios permeated by the knowledge society, globalization and interconnection, the field of curricula has been confronted when renovating the principles and methods encompassing both old problems as well as nascent ones. This requires other ways of interacting as a consequence of a series of far-reaching transformations that may affect other dimensions: cognitive, pragmatic, attitudinal, ethical and political.

Curricular innovation occurs in the very context of the educational situation (time and space) and becomes evident in the convergence of the knowledge, affectivity, thought and action of those intervening. They give it sense and meaning, starting from their own practices and from their culture. It is, in essence, a manifestation of the paradigmatic rupture much more evident on a small scale, that is, in the concrete practices where the ends themselves are born and consolidated. (Collado, et al., 2013, p. 14)

Curricular innovation shows itself in the *doing*, from the attitude of teachers to how students interpret it in the classroom, in how students perceive their teachers, and in how teachers respond in front of students. It is like a circle, in which the protagonists of innovation are the professors and the students in the educational scenario. Moreover, Ayestarán warns about the need to recognize the epistemological, political and social connotations inherent in the meaning of *innovation* from a critical point of view, so as to make way for an approach centered on “social innovation,” the latter referring to:

(...) the generation and implementation of new ideas on how people ought to organize interpersonal activities or social interactions so as to find one or more common goals. (Mumford, 2002, p. 253)

Therefore, curricular change must be conceptualized and analyzed from the viewpoint of institutional micro-policy. The recent literature on educational change and curricular innovations tends to take into account the movements of resistance and opposition by actors in light of the changes foreseen, especially when the latter are “top-down” and “outside-inside,” threatening their position at institutions, discrediting their habitual practices without offering conditions for the expected shift or when the atmosphere for change is taken to be “threatening” from the actors’ viewpoint (Díaz and Barrón, 2014). Similarly, one has to recognize the active role of students in curricular projects and undertaking them, not just as the recipients of them.

One may state, as do Didriksson and Herrera (2004), that innovation in higher education has constituted the most important academic value of the past decades, defining its pertinence starting from the contribution it makes to society. In addition to the production of leading-edge knowledge, it also ensures responsible and committed social participation based on a critical reflection of historical and institutional contexts.

Curricular Model of Competences

The various reforms carried out in the Mexican educational system in the 21st century, as well as the incorporation of various curricular models and, specifically, those revolving around competencies, have been subjected to a variety of criticism, theories and methodologies, all the more so in their implementation. Said model responds, to a certain degree, to the two major proposals heading educational models: the Tuning Project put forth by the European Union (EU) and, subsequently, the Definition and Selection of Competencies (OCDE, 2002). In such a scenario, we find that practically the entire Mexican educational system has undergone an effervescence for competencies.

We might point out that the decade of the nineties was characterized by the appearance of various proposals for professional training that tried to be in tune with workplace demands, considering the substantial modifications that the structure of trades and professions have undergone.



Education in competencies constituted another of the axes of the curricular debate during the period cited. Barrón (2000, p. 25) mentions that the three reasons underlying the educational project based on competences in the vision of the International Labour Organization (ILO) are: permit the centralization of economic growth and social development of human beings; make possible the creation of better job positions, in which the determining factor is the capacity of employability every human being has; and being centered on the need for change.

The diverse proposals for competencies-based education suppose curricular unification or harmonization in training professionals to meet standards of quality, accredit graduates and facilitate their placement in the versatile national and international labor context. This, faced with the urgency of recognition or professional equivalency in a milieu framed by market globalization, free circulation of professionals and the recommendations of international organizations (Valle, 1996).

In Mexico, the topic of curriculum based on competencies was, in its initial stages, oriented toward polytechnic institutions, technological ones, technical education, and technicians in secondary and higher education, as well as technological universities. This implied big challenges and it was, starting from some precepts from the ILO, that some of the criteria for educating students were defined, such as bringing them closer to real work scenarios. Parallel to recognizing the processes of alternation as a possibility for students, comprising a classroom stage within industry, the major problems was how to regulate the situation: how to not let employers think students constituted cheap labor and require a series of activities of them that, in their role as students, they could not carry out, and, on the other hand, not let students think they had rights, because they were not in the role of salaried workers.

We can point out that it is not possible to talk of a homogeneous curricular model for higher education vis-à-vis basic education, since each institution of higher education coins a conceptual framework around competencies. This is given meaning anew in light of the needs, mission statement, interests and vision of the institutions and, based on them, they put forth their educational model. Noteworthy is the diversity of interpretations underlying, explicitly or implicitly, in the use of the term *competencies*, ranging from identifying it with “proper knowledge” to the more complex notion taking it to be an:

(...) expression of the resources putting the individual into play when carrying out an activity and putting emphasis on how the subject ought to make use or handle what he/she knows. (Malpica, 1996, p.133)

In the current literature, one can find a wide range of meanings of what different authors understand by *competencies*. In many cases, they adopts a pragmatic, reductionist and technical vision, which, apparently, is the one proliferating today in a large number of educational and curricular projects. There, “competency” is reduced to the realm of “knowing how to do something,” procedural and technical in nature, a pathway only permitting defining lists of tasks or discrete and fragmented behavior (Díaz Barriga, F., 2003).

In addition to the conceptual diversity of *competency*, we have to consider the major problems faced by curriculum designers in higher education, such as determining generic, disciplinary and socio-functional competencies according to the area of study and profession. In many cases, the notion of *competency* integrally remits to a list of knowledge, abilities and attitudes but, at the time of interpreting and elaborating concrete programs, goes back to favor the former to the detriment of the latter. Often, they cannot be articulated. However, even more, what has been brought into question is the solid education of students at different levels.

Competency-based models were incorporated at varying times into the National Educational System, first into the educational models for technical and technological institutions, then those of higher education (1998-2000), and then the curricular reforms of Preprimary Education in 2004, Secondary Education in 2006, Basic Education and High-School Education in 2008. The different reforms have had an impact on the National Educational System, on the one hand, ranging from the legal frameworks for new educational regulations to the political-academic implications specific to each sub-system. One must recognize that:



Part of the studies addressing curricular design by competencies demarcate it as an educational focus centered on the student, propitiating students' active participation and recognizing variation in the rhythm and style of learning. It is posited as a focus combining theoretical education with the application of knowledge. Its aspiration is to achieve capacities to carry out a particular job, task or activity with a high level of quality and efficacy. (Díaz Barriga A, F and Lugo 2005, p. 71)

In defining different groups of competencies, be they generic, disciplinary or professional, teachers, researchers, administrators, management and employers have participated. In implementing and developing them, in some cases, workshops were held on the educational and curricular model, attended by teachers, administrators and students from a variety of academic areas. Guidebooks were elaborated for developing competencies in the classroom, programs or didactic sequences, as well as the inclusion of different environments for learning, teaching and learning strategies, and evaluation.

In Basic Education, the pedagogical model set forth in 2011 was based on the focus of education based on competencies, on the quest to go beyond the atomization of content, articulating knowledge, abilities and attitudes in the formative process. The purpose was to resolve the varying situations faced by students throughout their lives. The competencies to be developed within the framework of the Integral Reform of Basic Education (RIEB) are: competencies for permanent learning, competencies for handling information, competencies for handling situations, competencies for coexistence, competencies for life in society (SEP, 2011, p. 38). The latter would be done through formative fields that would be the axis of curricular organization for all basic education: language and communication, mathematical thinking, exploration and knowledge of the natural and social world, personal development and coexistence. The fields go all across study plans, from pre-school to secondary. The subjects through which competencies are tackled and developed would vary at each educational level, but their focus and articulation call for a single pedagogical and didactic treatment.

It is important to point out that, in the case of Basic Education, in incorporating generic competencies, Mexico followed the guidelines of the European Union (Eurydice 2002), in which Basic Education is assigned the commitment of developing two types of generic competencies: social and personal life, oriented toward educating the citizenry (tolerance, communication, honesty, enthusiasm, self-esteem, responsibility, initiative and perseverance), and academic life, linked to reading, writing, basic mathematical concepts, science and foreign languages.

Educating the citizenry, from an educational point of view, consists of educating all students with the essentials to move about and act as citizens:

This comprises, at least, two dimensions: (a) habits, civic virtues or the behavior needed for citizens to live together: those "minimal ethics" that a person must have to know how to live with others; and (b) the set of knowledge and competencies needed to participate in public life, get into the job market or get on with one's professional training. (Bolfvar, 2007, p. 4)

Such has always been posited in the pedagogical debates of the twentieth century by authors such as Dewey and Durkheim, who pointed out this task for schools (Díaz Barriga, A., 2006).

Insofar as higher education is concerned, some institutions assimilated generic competencies into study plans and set up general guidelines for their operation, seeking to provide autonomous learning for students, conscious and responsible decision-making, as well as recognition of their strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, working as part of a team, communicating with others, and handling information through information technologies.



The incorporation of said competencies into the curriculum is done be it in a parallel, differentiated or integrated manner. Insofar as the *parallel modality* is concerned, one can identify a group of generic competencies for the educational institution. To that end, specific courses were designed to develop them. For the *differentiated modality*, generic competencies were designed as a function of the professional profile, within the framework of an educational institution, positing specific courses for developing or working on them in particular subjects. Finally, the *integrated modality* allows articulating generic competencies with disciplinary/professional ones in real scenarios (Villardón, 2015).

Among the challenges for this model has been that of evaluating the development of competencies, be they generic, disciplinary or job-related, in students, given their complexity and the meager theoretical, methodological and instrumental discussion in the field.

Cultural Diversity and the Right to Education

In recent years, incorporating an intercultural perspective into the field of education has found a place on international and national agendas. This is due to the recognition made by those countries with cultural diversity of their multi-culturalism as defining characteristics and as reason for national pride. The preceding has led to incorporating cultural diversity into the various Latin American constitutions. Mexico was no exception, as can be seen in the amendment to Article 3 of the Constitution of 1992, on the occasion of the encounter between two worlds. The thorniest problem has been breaking with a concept of *multi-culturality*, which makes reference to the coexistence of peoples and/or group culturally different in particular spaces or territories, as opposed to *inter-culturality*, which refers to the relationship between these peoples and groups based on respect and from positions of equality.

Inter-culturality is understood as a broad social project, philosophical position and everyday functioning in the face of life. Because it is an alternative permitting rethinking and reorganizing the social order, because it insists on fair communication between cultures as figures in the world, and because it stresses that what is crucial is to leave spaces and time free so that said figures can become real worlds. (Gallardo, 2004: 3)

Within the framework of approaches about the right to education as a constitutional guarantee and as a human right, circular policies have sprung up, emanating from educational reforms, in an attempt to incorporate an inter-cultural perspective. However, we have to be cautious since we cannot ingenuously think about an educational model that is equitable and egalitarian without the relationship domination/submission that permeates hegemonic educational projects (Gasché, 2008).

In the U.N. Charter and, specifically, in that of its specialized agency for education, science and culture, UNESCO, as well as in the constitutions of many countries, the right to education has been set forth, constituting the basis for much of international effort, such as Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO, 1990, 2000), as well as the series of international conference promoted by UNESCO (Latapí, 2009). Therefore, to speak of the Right to Education, in this context, requires establishing a mutual commitment between the State and the people in charge of their human rights. To that end, one has to recognize the existence of persons in charge of human rights, who must be able to make use of diverse mechanisms to demand them (INEE, 2015), as well as the existence of people charged with compelling such: authorities responsible for guaranteeing compliance therewith (INEE, 2016).

UNESCO has established four criteria to be followed by education provided by the State: that it be *available*, *accessible*, *acceptable* and *adaptable*. Said criteria are often called the “Four As” and compliance is overseen by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which is the agency responsible for supervising execution of the Pact among participating countries.

It should be remembered that the Four As (Tomasevski, 2006) allude to the following principles:



a) *Availability*: conceived as a civil and political right in which the government is required to guarantee obligatory and gratuitous education that is available for all school-age children. As a cultural right, it means respect for diversity, in particular, through the rights of minorities and indigenous populations.

b) *Accessibility*: has different modalities at each educational level. The right to education must be carried out progressively, ensuring gratuitous, obligatory and inclusive education, at the earliest possible time, and facilitating access to post-obligatory education to the extent possible.

c) *Adaptability*: implies guarantees of quality in education. This refers to factors and conditions related to the education offered, such as: professional requisites for teachers, relevance and pertinence in curricula and teaching, the availability of the proper infrastructure and equipment for learning and for teaching practices, as well as student organization. For example, the rights of indigenous groups regarding the language in which they are taught, or gender equality that seeks equal opportunities for both sexes.

d) *Acceptability*: refers to the necessity that it be the schools that adapt to those being educated. This means identifying the obstacles children may encounter in accessing school, learning, and staying in school or finishing up their studies.

In this scenario, the right to education in Mexico is based on two pillars: a) ensure the coverage of the service and the enrollment of those being educated and b) promote improvements in quality, which includes notions relative to equity, relevance, pertinence, effectiveness and efficiency of education. Therefore, guaranteeing the right to quality education implies that all the people have real possibilities of being offered quality education, developing an educational trajectory without delay, graduating opportunely in accordance with the typical age for finishing obligatory education. All of this under flexible conditions that respond to student needs in different cultural and social contexts, as well as receiving a pertinent, acceptable and culturally-adequate education that is relevant, useful and significant for their lives (INEE, 2016).

In this context, indigenous and rural peoples face major disadvantages with regard to exercising their right to quality education. Despite Mexico's constitutional recognition as a pluri-cultural country, the inequality of participation of these peoples in political, economic, social, cultural and educational decision-making continues to be an unresolved affair (UNICEF-INEE, 2016).

Recent figures show that the indigenous population in Mexico totals some 11 million inhabitants, recognizing 68 indigenous populations and 364 variants, consisting of 11 Indo-American families (INALI, 2012). In 2015, for example, 10% of the country's inhabitants were indigenous. Of these, 3.9 million were children between the ages of 3 and 17 that should be in obligatory education, developing their capacities and aptitudes to the maximum. However, reality shows that there are still children that are not in school (UNICEF, 2016). In turn, of the almost 4 million indigenous youngsters and adolescents (3-17 years of age), slightly more than 1.8 million speak an indigenous language and, of these, 1.4 million live in rural areas. Approximately, 312,000 live in semi-urban localities and more than 100,000 in urban ones. Moreover, in 2015, nine of 10 students that speak indigenous languages attend school in localities showing high and very high marginalization (UNICEF, 2016). Starting from these structural characteristics, the universalization of access to obligatory education continues to be an on-going task.

Quite particularly, one should ask, "what is the quality of learning of the indigenous and rural population? According to the Examinations of Quality and Educational Achievement



given to third grade of primary school during the school year 2013-2014, for example, it happens that the greatest deficiency in terms of level of academic achievement acquired in Spanish occurs within the indigenous community: 52% of males and females from this sector of the population were below the basic level. In turn, just 8% of indigenous males attained at least a middle level of academic achievement in Spanish, while 9% of females did so. This is relevant if one compares, for example, that 53% of males in private basic education achieved at least a middle level of educational achievement in Spanish (45 percentage point higher), as did 64% of females in private basic education (55 percentage points higher) (INEE, 2016).

In the case of math, in the academic calendar 2013-2014, the greatest deficiency in terms of the level of academic achievement attained likewise occurred within the indigenous community: 33% of the females in this sector of the population were below the basic level, as were 29% of males. In turn, 35% of indigenous males managed at least to attain a middle level of educational achievement in math, as did 31% of females. This difference is not as radical in comparison, for example, with the percentage attained in the private basic-education system: 67% for males and 70% for females.

Based on the figures mentioned and in light of the criteria put forth by UNESCO to guarantee the Right to Education through recognizing cultural diversity and its full attention to school-age population, there is still quite a way to go. Despite efforts to incorporate an inter-cultural perspective into curricula and generate a series of competencies linked to the citizenry that target reversing the asymmetry undergone by native peoples over the centuries, by imposing on them assimilation, incorporation and integration into the social life of the country, to the detriment of their own cultural and linguistic identities (Gallardo, 2004), efforts made in terms of formal curriculum has not had full impact on the education of these students.

Given the preceding and by way of conclusion, one could state that the incorporation of an educational model based on competencies, as an innovative factor in the educational sphere, has lacked real impact that can be translated into educational quality for the varying educational types in Mexico and, specifically, in the field of domestic inter-culturality and the right to education.

Notes

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