

# From Problematization to Reconfiguration of Curricular Design and Evaluation in Mexico (Postgraduate Courses in Education in Mexico: Case of ISCEEM)

David Pérez Arenas<sup>1</sup>

Higher Institute of Education Sciences of the State of Mexico, Mexico

## Introduction

Until the end of the sixties, the ruling narrative upon the configuration of the field of curriculum in Latin America was based on a Galilean tradition and the hypothetical-deductive paradigm. From which there was an intention of giving a scientific validity to the theory on curriculum, pursuing a prescriptivism of the tasks that were proper to the design and evaluation of the educational programs. At the same time, the aim was to impose and legitimate the educational models in developed countries, looking forward to gaining followers and controlling their educational systems, just as it happened to the Program of Transference of Educational Technology for Latin America (Gaudiano, 1986).

Still, the effects of economical, political and social events that took place during the seventies and the beginning of the eighties in this region, lead to move from the questioning of paradigms and former models to the origin of a problematization or re-conceptualization of the field of curriculum in Latin America. This process was not only derived from the introduction of new theoretical paradigms, but also from the generation of alternative experiences related to the curriculum design of some higher education institutions. In Mexico, for instance, the modular proposal of the Autonomous University of Xochimilco or that of some majors belonging to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) meant a linguistic turn when being systematized and analyzed by researchers of the region. This linguistic turn lead to a discursive configuration of the field of curriculum, by means of methodological perspectives for its design and evaluation.

This process emerged in Mexico thanks to the works and investigations which were developed in an inter-institutional investigation seminar upon curriculum matters. This seminar was convened by UNAM (Orozco, 2016) and it went over the problematization of the field, moving from there to the design and development of proposals for curricular intervention. These studies went on expanding to the many different Higher Education Institutions to which the participants of the seminar were enrolled on. This caused the follow-up and systematization of some curricular experiences, and the reconfiguration of the field of curriculum in Latin America started



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Pérez Arenas, D. (2017). From Problematization to Reconfiguration of Curricular Design and Evaluation in Mexico (Postgraduate Courses in Education in Mexico: Case of ISCEEM).

*Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 14 (1-2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

to be heard in those countries that had a ruling presence regarding this topic in former years.

Some of the most salient experiences come from the recovery of contributions related to the re-conception of the term “curriculum”, (in terms of dimensions, foregrounds and levels of signification) and also from the fields of curricular structuring (De Alba, 1991), not only for the design, but also for the analysis of syllabus and curricular evaluation of the programs for higher education in Mexico.

In this work, the aim is to document and analyze the contributions of the experiences derived from a particular case: the design and evaluation of the curricular content of the programs for Master’s degree and Doctorate degree of the Superior Institute of Education Sciences of Mexico State (ISCEEM for its acronym in Spanish). Such experiences have permitted to shape the field of curriculum, based on the categories of Significance Notions and Fields of Curricular Structuring (De Alba, 1991). At the same time, the problems that were faced are pointed out together with the conflicts derived from the demands for the certification of such programs, framed by the modern educational policies and the context of globalization, neoliberalism and scientific development of these days.

### **From the Design to the Evaluation of postgraduate courses in Education**

The syllabus design for the master’s degrees in education that started to spread out in Mexico in the eighties came originally from the questioning of the empirical-analytical approaches. However, as they lacked alternative methodological approaches, they used to end up being compensated by technical or instrumental strategies that came from the same approaches. Yet, within the objectives of those programs, it was possible to note that the original social targets of the Higher Education were actually incorporated: the social commitment and the production of knowledge, as investigation and academic instruction were two of its constitutive elements.

Unfortunately, by the half of the eighties, modernizing educational policies started to impact the de-structuration of social identity of postgraduate courses, as they were ruled by the ideas of the introduction of the marked-oriented logic and the condensation of the new social order.

As part of the effects of such policies, there were five new characteristics: expansion, privatization, technologization, *professionalization and certification*, which shaped its new outline: commercialization of education. (Pérez Arenas, 2007). However, the last two characteristics are those that have impacted the most in the processes of design and evaluation, as well as in the need to re-conceptualize the field of curriculum.

One of the first consequences of the new educational policies in the curriculum of postgraduate courses, is the necessity for them to be evaluated and re-designed, taking as a principle the necessity to train professionals of education; and also to put the principle of responding to the training necessities for the professionals of education above everything else. The problem is that, to this new context, evaluation is reduced only to the processes of validation and certification, with certain criteria in which efficiency and social pertinence make the nodal point. At the same time, the professionalization towers above a type of education which is oriented towards knowledge and social commitment just to get reduced to a pragmatism that leaves behind theoretical and disciplinary formation.

All of this impacted in the demand for making an evaluation of the programs for postgraduate courses, parting from dimensions, variables and indicators but on the bias



to evidencing that such programs did not respond to the social necessities or the work field. Just as it happens nowadays in schools that insert most of their graduates in education degrees to the employment arena; the government promotes a pragmatic and professionalizing orientation, and it also fosters the incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies in all formation modalities.

This is how, from the nineties onwards, and especially in the first years of the XXI century, the syllabi of postgraduate courses have had to be subjected to those evaluation processes, while most of the recently-opened syllabi are underpinned by efficiency-oriented techniques. In this regard, there is a great diversity of criticism, but also a great lack of alternatives for evaluation and curriculum design for the postgraduate courses and in general, for higher education.

This context set the scenario for the emergence of some alternatives and intervention proposals for such educational levels, which started to gain visibility inside the seminar called “*Currículum Siglo XXI*”.

This seminar has been coordinated by Bertha Orozco (2016) for more than twenty years and it is part of the program called “*Programa Imaginarios y Debates Actuales en Educación*” ruled by Alicia de Alba. There, the participants have been researchers, professors, students and scholars coming from various universities and Higher Education Institutions from Mexico and some other Latin American countries, but its headquarters has always been the Institute of University and Education Research (IISUE), formerly called “*Centro de Estudios sobre la Universidad y la Educación*” (CESU) adscribed to National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

The seminar *Currículum Siglo XXI*, together with other two that conformed the *Programa de Imaginarios* became training spaces for the analysis and discussion of current topics related to curriculum, education theory and environmental education. There, some collective research projects were born and they influenced the design of institutional projects which were ruled by some of the members of the seminar. This promoted the possibility of influencing other vocational training arenas.

The seminar *Currículum Siglo XXI* has set in motion many contributions that allowed to move from problematization to the definition of alternatives for curricular intervention (Orozco & Ángulo, 2007) which can be drawn up from analytical categories that have influenced the design, analysis and/or curricular evaluation of the programs of institutions to which the members of the seminar are adscribed. Some of these categories, just to be mentioned are: Scientific conceptual structures on didactics (Angulo Villanueva, 2007), Applicant Profiles (Ysunza Brena, 2010), Conflicts in the Curricular Reform (Díaz Villa, 2007), Fields of Curricular Conformation and Structuration, and Complex Curriculum (Díaz Villa, 2007), Curricular Change (Orozco, 2015), Curricular Overdetermination (Pérez Arenas, 2007), among other categories that have also been retaken in projects and alternative proposals of intervention.

## **CCEC in the Evaluation and Curricular Re-structuring of postgraduate courses at ISCEEM**

The Superior Institute of Education Sciences of Mexico State (Instituto Superior de Ciencias de la Educación del Estado de México [ISCEEM]) carries out investigation and offers postgraduate courses in Education since 1981, but not until the mid-nineties of the twenty-first century did the context of modernizing educational policies led the institution to be subject of an external evaluation, given the need to certify its postgraduate course in Education Sciences. This demanded an increase of the graduation rate, and changes in the syllabus that had the purpose of meeting its



graduates' professional training. That made the conformation of an internal commission, headed by a member of the seminar *Curriculum Siglo XXI*.

One of the greatest conflicts that the commission had to face, regarding evaluation and re-structuration, was that of putting together the new training policies for the professionals of education and those associated with the production of knowledge in the field of education science, all with the social commitment to which they were oriented from the very beginning of the postgraduate courses of the institute.

In order to face the previous conflicts, the commission recovered some of the contributions of the seminar *Curriculum Siglo XXI*; in the first place, Alicia de Alba's proposal for Curricular Evaluation (1991), which was understood as a theoretical-conceptual seam between curriculum and evaluation that would put together multiple curricular analyses.

Curricular evaluation as a theoretical-conceptual seam, implicated the need to acknowledge the different approaches from which it is possible to understand both curriculum and evaluation. Regarding evaluation, those conceptions that associated the term with following, control or inspection of the educational process were put aside, together with those that would limit evaluation to a systematic or technical task whose most important worry is how to evaluate and accomplish that such programs would respond to the social commitments on which they were based.

Against those stances, the original purposes associated with a more complex concept of evaluation were recovered, setting the questions "what to evaluate and what for" above "how to evaluate". This needed a theoretical comprehension and an axiological assessment (De Alba, 1991) not only of the studies of postgraduate courses in education, but also of the master's and doctorate degrees in education offered by ISCEEM.

This evaluation involved a theoretical comprehension of the different purposes that the postgraduate courses in education gained, drawing them up from the context in which they were, together with an axiological assessment that revolved around particular and social meanings for the institutions and the subjects who promote or demand them. All of it interlocked with the social-cultural context to which they are restricted, the institutional, didactic and classroom-related dimensions that set them in motion, the implications of recovering and assuming evaluation as gearing for many curricular analyses defined as an investigation task and the goal of comprehending, assessing and transforming them into Significance Notions. (De Alba, 1991).

Significance Notions were defined as the array of aspects that generate a process of evaluation or curricular analysis, aspects that have relevance in a specific context. For instance, for the programs at ISCEEM, this relevance is *the original social commitment of the postgraduate course, the academic attainments, the training for investigation, the graduation rate*, among others that to be analyzed need to put together various dimensions of curriculum.

The meaningful aspects of the programs, resulted in analytical categories that condensed the problem areas and oriented the curricular analysis. For instance, the education policies, the syllabus, the institution, the education subjects (lecturers, students and graduates), the educational performance and the graduation rate; all of them intertwined by the training for investigation as one of the most important categories for curricular evaluation of the postgraduate courses in the institute.

This process also meant to widen the sight upon the curriculum, in order not to reduce it to the syllabi and programs only, neither to the empirical-analytical approaches that used to prevail. Running the risk of the lack of specificity with the widening of the perspective was not an option either.



Methodologically, such conceptions and strategies permitted the development of the analysis, design and evaluation tasks, underpinned by horizontal and collegiate investigation processes built on the basis of an adjustment between the given and the being given. (Zemelman, 1998), which parted from the definition and development of the following stages: I. Global Initial Analysis, Embodiment of the field to be evaluated, II. Delimitation of the Observation and Problematization fields, III. Theoretical-Conceptual Aspects and Empirical References of the Object, IV. Design and Application of the instruments for curricular analysis, V. Compilation and Systematization of information, VI. Curricular Analysis and Argumentation of Categories, VII. Conclusions and Proposals; all of it derived from Alicia de Alba's original proposal (1991).

These processes, carried out in different moments for each of the postgraduate programs at ISCEEM, gave information that oriented to decision-making. This information, in the nineties, led to restructuring the syllabus of the master's degree in education sciences and, in the first decade of the new millennium, led to the design of a new program: the master in educational research, as well as the restructuring of the doctorate degree in Education Sciences.

For the restructuring of the syllabi and the curricular design of the programs, Alicia de Alba's proposal (1991) of the Four Fields of Curricular Conformation and Structuration was resumed. (CCEC for its acronym in Spanish: Cuatro Campos de Conformación y Estructuración Curricular). The four fields: I) Theoretical-Epistemological, II) Social-Critical, III) The Professional Practice and IV) Scientific and Technological development, permitted to base the restructuring and design of programs in the institute, and it also represents one of the most important contributions to the curricular innovations in the first decade of the XXI century.

The importance of CCEC I (Theoretical-Epistemological) and CCEC II (Critical-Social) as basic and immovable components for curriculum design, gave way to placing the epistemic debates and the implications of the programs in the center. Specifically for the institute, those related to Education Sciences and the recovery of the original social function of the institutions of higher education, which were associated to production of knowledge and the social commitment (Villaseñor, 2003) of the postgraduate programs.

The incorporation and effect of these fields in the curricular structures of the postgraduate courses at ISCEEM, made it possible to move from the disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives to the multireferential ones (Ardoino, 1991) and those related to the complexity (De Alba, 2007). It also made it possible to acknowledge the importance of both knowledge derived from the disciplines and the one derived from the discourses and educational issues that have started to gain more presence in the alternative narratives that are opposed to the hegemonic ones surrounding the formation and production of knowledge in postgraduate courses in education.

The incorporation of CCEC III (Professional Practice) with an open and flexible perspective let to meet the necessities derived from professional practice of those who enrolled to the programs and it also opened the floor to the incorporation of emergent approaches that would take place later on, without having to wait until there was another change of Syllabus. In the same sense, CCEC IV (Scientific and Technological development) introduced new contents and modalities of formation associated with the incorporation of Communication and Information Technologies, which gave way to the latter introduction of technologization by means of virtual modalities.

Besides that, the fact that the academic formation and the formation for investigation became distinctive elements of the postgraduate programs in the institute



contributed to their curricular re-structuration through fields and work themes. They had the intention of analyzing and meeting the problems associated with the educational system or the professional practice of the magisterium; this was promoted on the basis of thought schemata, sustained by philosophy, epistemology or educational theory; this type of formation started to be left behind by the end of the nineties in Mexico. However, the master's degree and the doctorate degree at ISCEEM managed to keep ahead thanks to the incorporation of CCEC I and II to the postgraduate courses of the institute; but not as it regards to the majority of the programs that started to spread all over the country (Pérez Arenas, 2007).

The incorporation of CCEC's as a curricular foundation for the new programs in the institute has permitted to keep them away from the tendencies that have lately deconstructed its social identity, over determined by a new social contour: the commercialization of education. Notwithstanding the increasingly aggressive effects of current educational policies for postgraduate programs, in which the formation for research and the academic one have been demeaned or in the worst cases, excluded from curricular structures. (Pérez Arenas, Limón & Cortés, 2013). In this regard, it would be interesting to know how his phenomenon has taken place in other postgraduate programs in Latin America.

### **Curricular Evaluation and Certification, one of the conflicts in postgraduate courses**

Unfortunately, the new demands for certification and validation to which postgraduate courses need to be submitted, together with those of management and scholar organization of the programs that come from the current educational policies, do not correspond to their curricular foundations or their epistemic and methodological bases. This process has started to generate certain conflict and tensions not only in carrying them out but also in their evaluation processes; just as the most recent evaluation of the doctorate degree at ISCEEM shows (Pérez Arenas et. al, 2016).

In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that, even though the perspective towards the evaluation processes has widen and more-collegiate work strategies have been implemented, all of this has started to be surpassed, due to the new exigencies of certifying and validating the programs. The market-oriented logic has deconstructed their social identity and it has also over determined their new social environment (Pérez Arenas, 2007).

These are the reasons why it is compulsory to insist on the recovery of the fundamental purposes of curricular evaluation: to achieve a theoretical comprehension and an axiological valuation of the programs that have to be evaluated.

As for the theoretical comprehension of the postgraduate courses in education, it was important to reckon that nowadays, they face a process of deconstruction of their social identity, that is to say, the elements and characteristics that some decades ago would let to have certain clarity of their purposes, orientations and strategies of formation, have started to be dislocated. This causes, among other problems, a displacement of their original function, oriented to the production of knowledge by means of a serious formation for research, and the predominance of a social function assigned by the market-oriented logic. This process can be translated into what Moreno Bayardo (2003) has called "the perverse effects in postgraduate degrees" when putting a commercial interest before the institutions and the subjects that demand higher education, a true academical interest that used to prevail some decades ago.



As for the other component of evaluation, the axiological valuation or, in other words, the answer to the question *what to evaluate for* applied to the doctorate degree, it is associated to the meanings and senses that could be granted to this task. The intention is to achieve a certain knowledge and a broad explanation of the object to be evaluated, a feedback and a transformation of the object (De Alba, 1991, Díaz Barriga 2009). It does not imply to exclude or diminish the importance of the technical approaches of evaluation, neither does it imply not to respond to the requirements for certification and validation of the programs. The point is to perform these tasks with a direction and a sense that must be defined by the subjects who carry out the curricular evaluation. This places the problem in the arena of conflict and tensions, and it takes us to ask: what to evaluate a doctorate degree for?

It is important to underline that a doctorate degree in education, as well as all programs of higher education, do not have a steady identity and they have to be modified and adequated to new social contexts and educational policies that subordinate them. In this regard, if evaluation emerged from an institutional necessity with the purpose of keeping the official registration and achieving a governmental validation, it is fundamental to carry out the adequations to programs on the basis of a critical view that does not limit itself to answering mechanically to the recommendations from evaluators, it is also necessary to meet the institutional conditions and the academical logic to which these processes must be oriented.

All of the foregoing must be condensed in the validation or certification processes that have overdetermined the curricular evaluation; high graduation rates have been overrated and this has taken institutions to look for strategies that are oriented to increasing the percentages of graduation for quality's sake. However, in some cases this is just imperceptible and in some others are evidently affecting in a negative way the quality of the formation processes for investigation and the quality of the products that arise from such programs.

Institutions generate new graduation modalities ranging from "Professional Practice Memories" to the so-called "Zero-Modality" which means it was accomplished by academic excellence. There are also those modalities that change the name of their programs in order to avoid carrying with the burden of the lags in graduation rates and they head for the instauration of new formation modalities or strategies.

A paradoxical thing is that, while new curricular proposals of institutions such as ISCEEM underline the importance of formation for research, in research and towards research, and they recover experiences of other programs or institutions as it happened with the tutorial of the postgraduate course in education at UNAM, the new characteristics of such programs have had a great expansion in recent years, derived from the increase of demand and the strain that the new modalities of formation and graduation mean.

This pushes public Institutions to work with a double logic: that of the curricular proposals and the formation projects which are oriented to research, and that other associated to the accountability, not only with regard to the increase of the graduation rate, but also with regard to evaluation, and certification of their programs, their professors or researchers and the stimuli they receive for their productivity, which is measured in terms of the number of graduates they should comply with every year. This gets translated into an increasing laxity of criteria for the acceptance of a thesis, for example, and also a progressive stepwise displacement of the formation for research, even in investigation-oriented postgraduate programs.

It is important to note that even though the overdetermination of educational policies that is underpinned by the certification and validation of the postgraduate



programs has had an impact in the consolidation of an academic staff and the infrastructure of some postgraduate programs (Frezán, 2013:251), the effects of such policies have started to negatively affect the culture and the academic life of institutions that offer higher education. This has affected the intellectual formation and the investigation skills of those who graduate from such institutions. Of course, the quality of the products like investigation projects that graduates present as a degree thesis has decreased, due to the pressure exerted on students and teachers for the quick finishing of the works.

The hasty and thoughtless manner in which formation processes are pushed forward is impoverishing the academic life of the programs; that is the reason why it is urgent to have institutions analyze the way in which they can resolve the disputes generated by the exigencies to validate and certificate their programs and the necessity of keeping them with minimal conditions of quality.

All of these needs to be done while some alternative research gets to emerge, in regard with new methodologies and investigation strategies such as the narrative one, strategies that show wealth of experiences and knowledge that professors have accumulated in terms of methodology and didactic of investigation (Pérez Arenas, Atilano y Condés, 2017). A diversity of topics must therefore be considered in order to account for a wider and more complete set of elements and processes that are involved in the formation processes, which are not always covered in the formal structures or in the educational practice to which design and evaluation has been reduced if seen from the more conventional perspectives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [pearenas62@gmail.com](mailto:pearenas62@gmail.com)

## References

- Ángulo Villanueva, R. & Orozco, B. (2007) (Ed.) *Alternativas metodológicas de intervención curricular en la educación superior*, México, CONACYT, UAG, IISUE-UNAM, UASLP, UACH, Plaza y Valdés.
- Ángulo Villanueva, R. (2007) La estructura conceptual científico didáctica. México: Coedición CONACYT/ Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero /Seminario Currículum y Siglo XXI del IISUE-UNAM/Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí/Plaza y Valdés.
- Ardoino, J. (1991). “El análisis multirreferencial”, en colección de investigación en ciencias de la educación, pp. 173-181. Online: [http://publicaciones.anui.es.mx/pdfs/revista/Revista87\\_S1A1ES.pdf](http://publicaciones.anui.es.mx/pdfs/revista/Revista87_S1A1ES.pdf) Retrieved on August 16, 2016.
- De Alba, A. (1991) *Evaluación Curricular, Conformación conceptual del campo*. México, CESU-UNAM.
- De Alba, A. (2007) Currículum complejo. Reconstruyendo la crisis: la complejidad de pensar y actuar en contexto, en Ángulo, Rita y Bertha Orozco (Coordinadoras) *Alternativas metodológicas de intervención curricular en la educación superior*, México, CONACYT, UAG, IISUE-UNAM, UASLP, UACH, Plaza y Valdés.
- Díaz Barriga, Á. (2009) Criterios de evaluación externa de los posgrados en México, Un sistema de acreditación que desconoce su pertinencia social, en *El posgrado en educación en México*, México, IISUE-UNAM, pp. 45-88
- Moreno Bayardo, M. G. (2003) *El posgrado para profesores de educación básica. Un análisis en el marco de los posgrados en educación*. Cuadernos de Discusión, Núm. 5. México: SEBYN-SEP.



- Díaz Villa, M. (2007) Reforma Curricular: elementos para el estudio de sus tensiones, In Ángulo Villanueva, R. & Orozco, B. (Ed.) *Alternativas metodológicas de intervención curricular en la educación superior*, México, CONACYT, UAG, IISUE-UNAM, UASLP, UACH, Plaza y Valdés.
- Frezán Orozco, M. (2013) Acreditación del Posgrado. Institucionalización e impacto en Argentina y México, México, UAM, ANUIES, Biblioteca de la Educación Superior.
- Gaudio González, E. (1986) Reseña curricular del planteamiento curricular norteamericano. In *El currículum universitario México*, in press, 1986 (pp. 7-16 y 46-48), In De Alba, A.; Díaz Barriga, A.; Gaudio González, E. (Ed.) *El campo del currículum*. Antología. 1991, México, CESU-UNAM.
- Orozco Fuentes, B. (2016) Seminario Currículum Siglo XXI, Grupo de Investigación, en Pons Bonals, L. & De Alba, A. (Ed.), *Configuraciones narrativas en el campo de la investigación*. Seminarios y redes académicas, España, Octaedro.
- Orozco Fuentes, B. (2015) *El cambio curricular en la Facultad de Enfermería de la uaslp. Una mirada a su historia discontinua*, Tesis de Doctorado en Pedagogía, FFYL-UNAM. México
- Pérez Arenas, D. (2007) *Filosofía, teoría e investigación en las maestrías en educación. Un campo sobredeterminado*. México: IISUE- UNAM, UAG, UASLP, Plaza y Valdés.
- Pérez Arenas, D.; Limón, A. S. & García Cortés, J. (2013) Marginación, exclusión y/o desplazamiento de la formación relacionada con la Filosofía, la Epistemología y la Teoría Educativa en los posgrados en educación, en *Filosofía, Teoría y Campo de la Educación 2002-2011*, México, ANUIES, COMIE, 213-284.
- Pérez Arenas, D. (2016) (Ed.) et. al. Evaluación del programa de doctorado en Ciencias de la Educación del ISCEEM, Toluca, México, inédito.
- Pérez Arenas, D., Atilano, P. & Condés, F. (2017) *Formación para la investigación. Trayectorias, Experiencias y Saberes*. Toluca, México, ISCEEM.
- Villaseñor García, G. (2003). *La función social de la educación superior en México*. México: UAM-CESU-UNAM Y UV.
- Ysunza Bresa, M. I. (2010) *Perfil de egreso y formación profesional, una estrategia metodológica en el diseño curricular*, México, UAM.
- Zemelman, H. (1998) *Conversaciones Didácticas, El conocimiento como desafío posible*, Argentina, Edit. Educo.

**Submitted: November, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Approved: December, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

