

CURRICULUM, LABOR MARKET AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING¹

Ángel Díaz Barriga²
Concepción Barrón Tirado³

Origins and development of the curriculum field in Mexico

The field of curriculum settled in Mexico at the beginning of the seventies. Originally it was tightly linked with the in any way hegemonic expansion of the American educational way of thinking that prevailed during those years. We should not forget that several agencies had as mission to distribute the funds that were required by several Latin-American publishing houses, and particularly from Argentina, in order to issue and deliver for free to strategic libraries the works of diverse authors who belonged to so-called technical tendency about curriculum, such as Ralph Tyler, Benjamin Bloom, Robert Mager and James Popham. In several libraries that are part of the different countries' Secretary of Education or Educational research centers we still can find books with the slogan "Free copy, distributed with funds proceeding from the OAS (Organization of American States) or the ILO (International Labor Organization)".

The field of curriculum was created initially as a field narrowly linked with the study plans and programs. And although its impact reached the whole educational system, which started a huge reform process in order to implement behavioral objectives, its influence was even stronger in higher education. The main reason is undoubtedly that the study plans for primary and secondary education in Mexico are centralized, which means

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² Researcher at the Centro de Estudios Sobre la Universidad. UNAM. E-mail: adbc@servidor.unam.mx

³ Researcher at the Centro de Estudios Sobre la Universidad. UNAM. E-mail: barront@servidor.unam.mx

that they are drawn up for the whole country at the federal Secretary of Education; quite the opposite, each university is obliged to draw up its own curriculum projects. This explains why curriculum research and development are, in Mexico, so tightly linked to higher education. In both of the researches (Díaz Barriga, A., coord., 1993 and Díaz Barriga, A., coord., 2003) that we carried out we found that almost 80 per cent of the production about curriculum in Mexico deals with this education level. The incorporation and development of the field of curriculum became evident since the adoption of two perspectives. Initially, at the beginning of the seventies, and as a result of the reading carried out by the Mexican researchers of authors who belonged to the technical trend of curriculum, curriculum studies in Mexico focused on the design of study plans and programs in which learning objectives (such as behavioral goals), the development learning strategies and the definition of assessment system were delimited. Very soon, less than five years after the incorporation of this perspective, they started with developments of their own. The concepts of “necessity diagnosis” and “sources for curriculum design” were replaced by other such as “reference frame for the design of study plans”, and professional performances were analyzed from a Marxist perspective, based on the “professional practice” concept built on specific perspectives of Althusser’s theory. In several curriculum designs the “transformation object” concept as an important element of the study programs, able to reorient the perspective of behavioral goals. In any case, what we wanted to highlight here is that the incorporation of the curriculum field in Mexico made feasible to include the technical point of view, with behavioral elements, and this started immediately to generate new outlooks related to the specific needs of the national higher education system. However, it remained for a long time tightly linked to the design of study plans and programs, domain where it is still actively involved.

At the end of the seventies, another perspective about curriculum was incorporated, narrowly connected to the so-called hidden curriculum, in which expressions such as “daily life” were used. But although an important group of professors and researchers encouraged the development of this perspective, its evolution in Mexico has been less significant than in other countries. This does not mean that its results are not important, and we can even say that there were personal contributions to this part of the field. In 1993, the committee that analyzed the situation of curriculum research in Mexico (Díaz Barriga *et al.*, 2003) considered that what had been drawn up in Mexico was a new “in process curriculum” concept to deal with a whole of school situations which neither are restricted to the aspects of formal curriculum nor have only to do with the so-called hidden curriculum. Those two perspectives on the field of curriculum have evolved a lot in more than thirty years of development of the national education system. Although it corresponded initially to the original subjects and questions raised by the American debate of the fifties, we can state nowadays that it has a profile of its own. Even more, one of the conclusions to which the Mexican Educational Research Council (Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa, COMIE) came was to recognize that since 1993 curriculum research in Mexico is in a consolidation process. The numbers about curriculum research show that this conclusion is accurate. During the nineties, 719 research products were identified, amongst which 60 were books, 126 book chapters, 262 articles in academic reviews, 90 postgraduate dissertations, 121 communications and 70 documents. Even if we consider that some of the categories, such as postgraduate dissertations, contain even more production than what has been actually recorded, the whole literature shows the high development degree that curriculum has achieved in our academic environment.

The main subjects that are analyzed keep a tight connection to the conceptualization of the field, in which researchers reconstruct the paradigms that originated the field at the beginning of the twentieth century, analyze the way in which the way to think of curriculum within the perspective of study plans and programs developed, and also in process, experienced and hidden curriculum. We also can find diverse dissections of the main subjects that have been the object of curriculum development processes, such as curriculum adaptation, competence-based education, training for practice, student-centered training based on a constructivist perspective, problem-based learning; all those are considered as the “hallmark” of the nineties with regard to the perspectives that deal with professional training. And a particular emphasis is put on the analysis of the tensions that arise within the curriculum environment, which derive from the implementation of institutional assessment policies related to the allocation to the higher education institutions of fiscal economic resources, and from the setting-up of a program assessment system at the end of the nineties.

Curriculum and professional training

If we start recognizing curriculum as a process, we can notice the emergence of a “research line that focuses on the study of training and social exercise of the university professional” (“una línea de investigación que centra sus esfuerzos en el estudio de la formación y del ejercicio social del profesional universitario”, Díaz Barriga *et al.*, 1995: 34). The investigations about professional training during the eighties generally dealt with curriculum with regard to the problems experienced by professions in Mexico, in search of alternative models for the training of higher education students.

During the nineties, the debate about the nature of the professional profiles offered by the different higher education institutions in a context of globalization, of hyper development of technologies and of significant changes within labor organization and the production and service spheres has been intensifying. Unlike during the previous decade, in which professional training was ruled both by the progresses in the discipline and by the requirements of the labor market, in the last years the principles of efficiency, effectiveness and quality are prevailing, and those are express themselves within the curriculum domain by means of the search for polyvalent interactions, the control of cognitive strategies, the application of conceptual and methodological tools, the development of in-advance and porosities thinking strategies and of an enterprising sense. In this way the purpose is to guarantee the pertinence of training with regard to the demands and requirements of globalization and to the educational trends that come from the international organizations. Likewise, the establishment of trade agreements with other countries –and in the Mexican case, the NAFTA (North-American Free Trade Agreement, in Spanish TLC)— makes necessary for the involved countries to generate equivalent mechanisms for professional assessment in order to guarantee the quality of the professional service cross-border trade. For this reason, Mexico had to develop educational program accreditation systems and certification systems for the student who graduated in the different professions (Barrón and Isunza, 2003).

In this context, professional training has been focusing on new human resources requirements and on the creation of new professional profiles that are more appropriate to the new world order. The international organizations and agencies, when evaluating the educational results, have incorporated to their agenda as a very important topic the problem of professional profiles appropriate to the so-called “knowledge society”.

The repercussions of those demands and of the transformations within the field of research and curriculum practice are very important. The subject is tightly linked to the debate on the educational, cultural, economic, political and ideological goals of the school institutions, to the educational aims that can be found in the professional training processes and to their pertinence with regard to the requirements and needs expressed by the diverse sectors of society. What can be observed is thus, on one hand, a real concern for the conceptualization and the strategies that make possible to draw up the professional profile and, on the other hand, the attempts to identify a field of problems related not only to the current pertinence of the curriculum strategies implemented by the higher education institutions in order to withstand and make easier the training required by the so-called knowledge society, but also to the specific features that this training should have in order to prepare adequately to certain professions, characterized by specific occupations.

In order to analyze the professional training models and tendencies that prevailed during the nineties, Barrón and Isunza (2003) organized them based on a continuous axis; in one of the poles they located the models that can be described as “economicist”, since they propose a training type that meets more directly the demands of the productive apparatus and of the labor market, such as the competence-based, the practice-oriented and the in-service model, or the model based on problem solving; in the other, they located models and tendencies that they characterized as “humanist”, since they do not only include proposals directed to the scientific education or the training for work, buy they also stress put the emphasis on the education to values and the student’s training for life in a more comprehensive way. Amongst those they identified the modular model and the training tendencies oriented towards interdisciplinary learning, tutorships, the reflexive professional perspective, transversals-subjects and the training to values. They also noticed the

uninterrupted presence and revitalization of models that emerged during the eighties, such as the modular model, and their coexistence with recently created tendencies, such as the orientation towards interdisciplinary learning.

Since the eighties several emerging themes related to the study of human rights or to the environmental and cultural dimensions could be identified while analyzing the contents of the study plans. During the nineties, the contents generally appear in association with the tendency based on cross-subjects, for which the main concern has been to link education to life and to include ethical aspects able to guarantee the individuals' comprehensive development. Likewise, during the nineties the emphasis is put on the value-based curricular organization, which aims to face the most important challenges of the whole humanity such as peace, sustainable development and international cooperation based on respect, democracy and cultural valuation.

The models and tendencies that could be identified show sometimes blur borders or even clear juxtapositions, which makes difficult to situate unequivocally all the reviewed works. During this decade the authors identified not only works for which the main purpose of training was to develop technical and professional abilities, but also proposals oriented to the development of critical thought and social conscience. However, neither the first nor the latter deal with the educational dimension of training. This concern about pedagogy disappeared since the eighties, decade in which discourse was strongly influenced by the sociological and education planning perspectives. During the nineties, the emphasis on discourse was slightly influenced by educational psychology; the concern for strategic planning is still important, but the absence of the educational dimension is still prevailing (Barrón and Isunza, 2003).

Professional training and labor market

Within the field of educational research we can identify other researches which tackle the requirements of the labor world and their repercussions on professional training, from the economic or sociological point of view, and which deal indirectly with the curriculum subjects.

The debate started by the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco campus, on profession and professional practices as points of reference for the design of curricula allowed to incorporate to the field the perspectives of educational economy and sociology of the professions. The first of them points out that during the twentieth century the debate on education adopted a particular modality, “since the act of education began to be seen as a system of investment and economic costs, whose results must be faced in terms of efficiency and productivity” (“ya que se empezó a vislumbrar el acto educativo como un sistema de inversión y costos económicos, cuyos resultados merecen ser confrontados en términos de eficiencia y productividad”, Díaz Barriga, 1993). This kind of studies was based on the human capital theory and in the so-called alternative trends (Gómez Campo and Munguía Espitia, 1981; Reynaga, 1983; Dettmer and Esteinou, 1983). The latter, the theoretical approach called sociology of professions, was also as basis for curriculum and, indirectly, to deal with professional training. This approach had as purpose to search for the origin and development of curriculum in the economic and political context of a specific country, taking into account the occupational structure, the corporative promotion system and the particular history of each particular profession.

The current labor market requires professionals with different characteristics as yesterdays, and the discussion about an eminently theoretical or practical training is

replaced by the adoption of a professional training that appreciates more than anything the acquisition of specific *abilities to work*.

The current discourse does not yet consider as the only significant element to make the most of the acquired knowledge so that they result in practice; the very rapid progresses in knowledge also makes necessary to develop specific abilities that help to incorporate, in any historical moment or geographical context, the knowledge required by the individuals to insert themselves in their life or in their professional functions. At the beginning of the nineties emerged the new plans of structural reforms for the higher education institutions, in their study plans and programs and the teaching and learning methods, aiming to train professionals who could meet the demands of the globalization. Some of the significant subjects were the improvement in the quality of educational processes and results, the replacement of the school model, based on the definition of space and time to study and learn, by a new continuous learning model, that is a more flexible organization based on the new information technologies, and also the development of the students' intellectual abilities, which provides them with the necessary resources to face the technological, economic and cultural changes, the development of labor, professional and academic competencies, in order to establish tighter links between the students and their real job settings.

The investigations that were carried out during the last decade about the relation between education, professional training and labor market, focused on the knowledge, explanation, characterization and diagnosis of the interaction modalities between those spheres and were organized in the following categories: a) studies about a specific profession; b) researches about the impact of the new industrialization and productive restructuring processes on the professionals' employability; c) studies that have as their

main object the employers; d) analytical studies in which the institutional, economic and educational factors are discussed and conceptualized (Reynaga and Larraguivel, 2003). In parallel with this studies, other researches were carried out, which aimed to characterize the effects of schooling on job insertion, from the economic point of view, with a slight predominance of the use of census information about the economically active population's economic behavior and, to a lesser extent, of the National Survey about Education, Training and Employment (1993) (Reynaga and Ruiz, 2003).

The studies about graduated students

Based on notions such as quality, efficiency, relevance and significance, the assessment processes have become the main source of information for the authorities' and the academic staff's decision-making processes, with which they seek to orient the action towards an improvement of the universities' substantial academic tasks. Assessment comprises not only the design of study plans and their implementation, but also their products, that is the students who graduated, by means of monitoring studies. Proof of this interest in the fact that the Sub-ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research considered institutional self-assessment as the central element of the educational modernization (SESYC, 1990). The systematical development of studies about graduated students of the higher education institutions have been considered as a fundamental element that makes possible to detect the external output of those institutions and to encourage internal changes on stronger bases. Those who base their studies on this perspective believe that the monitoring of graduated students "helps to review carefully the significant changes within a profession and to identify the profile of the professionals and the kind of abilities and knowledge that are required by the labor market" ("sirve para una revisión cuidadosa

de los cambios significativos en una profesión y para identificar el perfil del profesionista y el tipo de habilidades y conocimientos que se solicitan en el mercado del trabajo”, Todd y Huguet, 1990).

The results of those studies allowed to identify the current requirements for professional training, the quality, productivity and competitiveness standards, the employers’ specific demands, the requirements for the new professional profiles, and specific suggestions for the modification of study plans. And they also highlighted the interest in detecting technical problems within training and the specific requirements of initial and continuous training before developing academic dissertations or proposing explanatory models. Currently, we can appreciate in monitoring studies a gradual shift from an interpretative to a more evaluative approach, based on the perspective of educational planning, which is part of the educational policies that come from the State.

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