

Teaching Representations of Competency-Based Education. A Case Study

Representaciones docentes de la Educación Basada en Competencias. Un estudio de caso

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Summary

The aim of this research was to know how the Competency-Based Education (CBE) approach is represented by professors who are part of the professional education of psychologists, and the challenges and implications of, in their opinion, incorporating it in the classroom practice. Therefore, a research was conducted to know the type of representations and meanings that they give to the approach for its approval or rejection, whether they apply it in their teaching practice, and the kind of competencies that they want to promote among their students for their professional practice. This case study that counts with the collaboration of professors from the Psychology Specialty delivered in one of the university campuses of the UNAM University, used a qualitative methodology with a descriptive and interpretative approach that used semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool. The most distinctive results demonstrate that, concerning the heterogeneous nature of the disclosed representations among the interviewed professors, the balance falls in favor of the teachers that do not approve and/or use the competency-based approach. Their most consistent arguments to reject it included the unfamiliarity with the approach, or the difficulty to put it into practice, and/or its connection with neo-liberal, functionalist and business policies. However, the professors that accept and apply it, value the development of attitudes considered by the approach, especially those with a humanistic view towards the education of psychologists; while others appreciate how it promotes the necessary abilities for an efficient professional performance.

Keywords: Competency-based education, social representations, professional education, psychologists, professors.

Resumen

El propósito de la investigación fue conocer cómo representan el enfoque de la Educación Basada en Competencias (EBC) profesores que participan de la formación profesional de psicólogos, y los retos e implicaciones que desde su

perspectiva tiene incorporarlo en la práctica del aula. Para ello se indagaron el tipo de representaciones y sentidos que le otorgan al enfoque para su aceptación o rechazo, si emplean este en su práctica docente, y el tipo de competencias que les interesa promover en sus estudiantes para su ejercicio profesional. Como estudio de caso, en el que colaboraron profesores de la carrera de Psicología que se imparte en uno de los campos universitarios de la UNAM, se utilizó la metodología de corte cualitativa, con enfoque descriptivo e interpretativo, teniendo como instrumento de recolección de datos la entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados más distintivos muestran que en la heterogeneidad de representaciones develadas entre los docentes entrevistados, la balanza se inclina hacia los docentes que no aprueban y/o no emplean el enfoque basado en competencias. Entre los argumentos más consistentes de estos para su rechazo están el desconocimiento del enfoque o dificultad para llevarlo a la práctica, y/o su vinculación con las políticas de corte neoliberal, funcionalista y empresarial. Sin embargo, quienes sí lo aceptan y aplican valoran el desarrollo de actitudes que contempla el enfoque, principalmente los que tienen una visión humanística para la formación de psicólogos, y otros aprecian que promueve las capacidades para un desempeño profesional eficiente.

Palabras claves: Educación basada en competencias, representaciones sociales, formación profesional, psicólogos, profesores universitarios.

Introduction

The competency subject has always had a prevailing place in the education of our country since the end of the last century, and has been a matter of debate and controversy between the curriculum specialists and its actors.

Taking into account the gained importance of the competency-based education in our country, as well as the discussions about its adjustment to the Mexican context, our work pretends to provide information that contributes to understand the issues, controversies and challenges that the competency-approach represents for professors in their educational practice.¹

The history of the case includes the education policies present in the last decade aimed at increasing the quality of education, boosting curriculum changes in all the education levels, replacing the traditional pedagogical models focused on teaching through learning-centered models. This promoted an increased number of researches reporting, from the experience and point of view of their own actors, the impact of this curriculum and pedagogical changes and innovations in their practice, resulting in the development of the first basic and empirical material for their assessment.

It is frequently found within the conducted researches that there is a series of inconsistencies, resistances and strategies adopted by the professors to deal with the curriculum changes and innovations. It has been a constant declaration the fact that they, by themselves, do not empower the professors to implement the necessary changes and therefore, it is essential to find out why they do not achieve the expected success. (Covarrubias & Casarini, 2013).

Concerning the particular case of the Competency-Based Education (CBE), the permanent debate between specialists and researchers is based on, at least, two recurring topics. On the one hand, there is a problem with

1 The results are part of the line of research "Curriculum Processes and Pedagogical Practices in Higher Education", of the research project Education Evaluation and Planning of the FES Iztacala-UNAM. The preliminary results of this project were presented at the IV ALFEPSI Congress: Identity, Innovation and Social Commitment, in the city of Santa Marta, Colombia, October 2015.

the polysemy of the word *competency* due to the varied meanings assigned; therefore, it is preferred to talk about the *notion* of competencies instead of its *concept*. We are still far from having an accurate, operational and slightly agreed definition of the word

(Winterton, Delamare y Stringfellow, 2006; Planas-Coll, 2013). On the other hand, we have the theoretical-practical implications involved in the competency-based approach for the curriculum and the educational processes (Díaz Barriga, 2013).

Even with these limitations, the CBE has been widely adopted in our country. In elementary, secondary and higher education, the incorporation of the competency-based approach has been the result of the curriculum and educational changes conducted during the last decade. Even when Higher Education Institutions (HEI) set the innovation by using this approach in their study plans, it has been promoted by means of the implementation of its own educational and academic models, and based on their autonomy, they decide its use, the moment and the approach of competencies to be used (Díaz Barriga, F. et al., 2013).

Despite the inclusion of this approach in the educational curriculum of diverse professionals such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and others, the competency-based education, as a novelty or as an educational innovation, is still a matter of controversy nowadays (Díaz Barriga, 2013). It is not clear or agreed how to use a competency-based program. Recent university curriculums developed in the country with this approach consider different interpretations as well as teaching and learning methods (Moreno, 2010). Therefore, in spite of its acceptance at a curriculum level, the researchers of the educational field declare that it is necessary to find out what is understood and implemented as competency-based education in the practice. There is no doubt about the legitimacy of the Psychology in the contemporary world due to its contributions to the knowledge and treatment of a variety of problems at individual and group levels within the different aspects of human life. Nevertheless, when analyzed as a profession, there is an intense debate

about the efficacy of its professional practice and social relevance. Among the pointed out factors, it is the excess of theorization and transmission of disciplinary contents as well as the poor preparation of skills and competencies, which means a gap between the professional education of a psychologist and the occupational and social needs of the society. (Preciado & Rojas, 1989; Almeida, Guarneros, Limon & Romon, 1989; Castano, 1989; Lara, 1989; Herrera, 1993; Harrsch, 1998; Castaneda, 1999; Covarrubias, 2003; Covarrubias & Camarena, 2010; Zanatta & Yuren, 2012). In effect, when professional education is not able to connect scientific knowledge with social demands, it casts serious doubts on itself while considered as distant or taken out of context from the professional life.

In this way, initially we ask ourselves if the competency-based approach represents an alternative to solve the problems related to Psychology teaching. Regardless of the perspective or school of thought when dealing with this issue, there are two implicit characteristics in any definition of competency: one focuses on the performance and the other restores the specific conditions of the situation in which this performance becomes relevant (Victorino & Medina, 2007).

However, and as documented in a sufficient manner, the professor is the first mediator between the curriculum prescriptions or educational innovations and the pedagogical practice (Young, 1981; Gimeno and Perez, 1989; Gimeno, 1995). Therefore, due attention should be paid to how professors represent, conceive or question the competency-based approach in order to adjust it to the needs of the professional education of the psychologists. In this way, the aim of this research was to inquire about the representations and meanings that psychology professors from a university campus of the UNAM University give to the approach for its approval or rejection; whether they use it in their teaching practice, and, if applicable, the kind of competencies they want to promote among their students.

From here, the following questions guided our research: How do psychology professors who participate in the professional education of

psychologists in a particular university location represent or conceive Competency-Based Education (CBE)? What meanings, representations or assessments do they assign to the approach for its approval or rejection? Is there a preference over this approach according to the psychology area in which the professors teach? If this is the case, which competencies do they want to promote?

We choose the qualitative methodology in its form of case study as the most suitable research tool to respond our questions; while we were focused on comprehending how a particular context and curriculum practice work (Stake, 1999). This is the case of the Psychology specialty that is delivered in one of the multidisciplinary campuses of the UNAM University, characterized by the diverse epistemological identities of their professors, which are manifested in the varied ways they conceive psychology teaching and relate themselves with the teaching practice. It is not surprising to observe among their professors the plurality of ways to approach knowledge, teaching and assessment (Covarrubias, 2003; Covarrubias & Camarena, 2010).

As a case study, we opted for a deconstructive proposal to interpret the discursive structures produced by the professors to “understand” or comprehend what happens in a particular context. We gave priority to their personal logic reflected in their educational practice (Stake, 1999), from their social representations and, specifically, those concerning the competency-based approach. We intended to enter into the non-visible side, the underlying structures with the aim of explaining what apparently seems to be superficial and meaningless. We also committed, as researchers, to put ourselves in other people’s position to observe the social phenomena from their point of view to analyze and interpret them.

Social representations are an invaluable opportunity to get close to the comprehension of the reference frameworks that support and establish the professional and pedagogical identities of professors, and the ways by which they express and project themselves during their teaching activities. They also enable to know how they obtain, build and restore their own discipline

and professional knowledge and the meanings they confer to the pedagogical practices they apply.

We consider that being aware of the opinion that the people directly involved in the educational process have about the competency-based education approach, enables to provide information for its problematization as educational innovation. It also allows not only to provide knowledge of this research field but also to propose methods and changes to adopt better teaching practices. While and as stated by Senge (2002), if we want to improve a school system, it is necessary to investigate first the meaning conferred by the professors to the changes and innovations to originate real changes within educational institutions.

Social Representations in Education.

Representations within the educational field, as a unit of analysis, gain real meaning since they are the basis to disclose the phenomena sometimes imperceptible to the eye but that may affect or influence the teaching and learning processes.

For Moscovici (1986), the social representation is a specific form of knowledge aimed at elaborating the behaviors and communication among individuals. It is an organized body of knowledge and one of the psychological activities by which people are able to make tangible the physical and social reality; they gather in groups or in a daily relation of exchanges, and release the power of their imagination. It is a practical knowledge of common sense that allows the social exchange, transmission and dissemination of that “ingenuous” knowledge.

Abric (2001) clarifies that the social representations are, at the same time, the product and process of a mental activity in which the individual or the group restores the reality that is confronting and assigns it a specific meaning. In this way, they are not exclusively cognitive, they are socio-cognitive constructions forming individual, psychological and social components; this

means there is a cognitively active individual in line with the rules governing cognitive processes. The implementation of these processes will depend on the social conditions on which these representations are constructed or transmitted.

Social representations entail a fundamental role in the practice and dynamic of social relations. They respond to essential needs and purposes: assistance in comprehending and explaining reality (a practical know-how with common sense), defining identity and protecting the group specific nature (placing individuals and groups in the social field). Moreover, they help on guiding behaviors and practices (making up a guide for action) as well as making possible to explain and justify positions and behaviors (justify behaviors, actions) (Abric 2011).

Their relevance in the educational field, especially in the university sphere, the one we are studying here, rests on their contribution by revealing information to adjust the educational practices and activities during the professional training based on the professors' and students' needs according to the institutional and contextual conditions in which a curriculum operates.

Method

This research aims to analyze the representations that the Psychology Specialty professors from a university campus of the UNAM University have concerning the Competency-Based Approach (CBE) and their assigned meanings for its approval or rejection, whether they implement it in their teaching practice, and, in their case, the kind of competencies they want to promote.

Due to our aim of study and interest in a particular case, we used a qualitative methodology with a descriptive and interpretative approach (Erickson, 1989); we selected the case study as a research process (Stake, 1999) since it allowed us to obtain the representations of the professors in their educational context from a psychosocial perspective.

The qualitative or interpretative research focuses on the human meaning in social life and utilizes, as a basic validity criterion, the immediate and local meanings of the actions in accordance to the actions as defined from the actors' point of view (Erickson, 1989). This methodology recovers the socially-constructed nature of reality and the close relation between the researcher and the researched reality. Therefore, the production of valid and relevant knowledge is considered a construction process of new meanings and representations based on the contrast of the interpretations of different individuals within the same reality. This way to understand human behavior emphasizes the hermeneutics, as a process of interpretation of the human phenomena and the subjectivity, as a scope of analysis essential for the comprehension of human nature (Perez Gomez, 1998).

Nevertheless, this method also implies an active, systematic and strict guided research process that considers taking decisions about suitable topics for research in the area of study but without considering the generalization of the data, even if this information is likely to be similar in different contexts (Taylor & Bodgan, 1990).

For this case study, our responsibility fell on comprehending how the professors plan their practice, the underlying aspect, what gives meaning and the non-visible fact that bring us closer to understand a teaching activity within a specific educational practice. However, we did not intend to generalize the data given that, social phenomena and behavior arise from contextual features along with distinctive biographic, social and professional characteristics of the individuals. Therefore, each context has a unique character and is not possible to obtain a general verification from the hypothesis (Stake, 1999). In other words, we did not intend to reach general premises or rules.

In order to reach consistency and exactitude from the data and the provisional conclusions, we emphasized the identification of different points of view and perspectives within the permanent contrast of the inquiries, provisional inferences and work hypotheses that result from reflection, debate and contrast process performed by means of the production of theories from

the reality registers. The strengthening of theoretical knowledge, as a concept tool, occurs within a discursive process of research and involvement in the reality; becoming a tool to enrich and support deliberation (Guba, 1983).

We are not seeking to adjust the knowledge produced during the research to a closed theoretical framework, verify or formulate a theory; instead, we maintained an open perspective aiming to find theoretical clues able to respond or support the data we obtained from the first stages of the research. Consequently, neither we established categories a priori nor gathered information into categories predefined by a theory. On the contrary, this was a the result of an accurate, progressive and reflexive analysis

The Scope of Study.

In accordance to the subject of enquiry, some professors of the Psychology Specialty from one of the university campus of the UNAM University were invited as representatives of this institution, located in the northern metropolitan area of Ciudad de Mexico, to participate in this interview, resulting in a non-probabilistic sample; nevertheless we intended to call professors from the different areas, shifts, gender and working service in the specialty.

The group was formed by 35 participants: 15 males and 20 females, 22 individuals from the morning shift, 3 from the evening shift and 10 with a mixed schedule, with a service range between 2 months and 39 years. Each professor came from one of the nine academic areas within the specialty: Social Theoretical, Social Applied, Quantitative Methods, Clinical Psychology, Especial Education and Rehabilitation, Development and Education, Methodology, Human Experimental and Animal Experimental Psychology (see distribution on Table 2).

The number of participating professors was determined based on the saturation and reiteration of the emerging information (Saltalamacchia, 1992).

The Methodology Tool.

For the implementation of the semi-structured interview as a source of information, we considered some of its essential features such as its flexibility and dynamism when achieving, within a low stress environment, the representations that the professors assigned to the CBE (Taylor & Bodgan, 1990).

The interviews were carried out individually and voluntarily from October to November, 2013; from a list of guiding or core questions ensuring the exploration of the basic dimensions of the research. The list included the following questions: What do you think of the prevailing debate around the Competency-Based Approach? Have you implemented this approach in your practice? Why? Do you encourage the development of competencies in your class? Which competencies would you foster among your students? The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Building Theoretical and Analytical Categories.

The analytical-interpretative process of the emerged information considered seeking common elements in all interviews and their connection with concepts or theoretical categories belonging to the teaching study field; enabling the building of theoretical and analytical categories (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). See an example of the built categorization on Table 1.

This allowed the organization and presentation of information around three major axes: implementation/non implementation of the Competency-Based Approach, representations in opposition to and representations in favor of the approach.

Table 1

Categorization example of the information acquired from the conducted interviews with professors.

Question N° 1				
What do you think of the prevailing debate around the competency-based approach?				
Interview Number	Transcription	Social Category	Analytical Category	Theoretical Category
(E12, Social Theoretical, p. 1,3)	“I do not agree with this model, it is bringing an end to the intelligence of Mexicans, it will ultimately finish with this. [...] Competency fosters technocratic thinking; therefore it will not allow people to seek for deeper relations since it implies thinking and later, thinking causes headache... in my opinion, it is not useful to educate people able to make proposals, seek for solutions; functional people in a company, in other words cheap labor force”	“it is bringing an end to the intelligence of Mexicans; it fosters technocratic thinking that is not useful to educate people able to make proposals, seek for solutions; functional people in a company, in other words cheap labor force”	Technical training, technocratic, functional	Technocratic and functional orientation
(E7, Development and Education, p. 1)	“... the most concerning fact of the competency-teaching model is its connection with an educational policy primarily orientated towards a technical training... It is the market deciding the necessary competencies to educate a person aiming to make them useful to this economic system”	“it is involved into an educational policy primarily orientated towards a technical training... it is the market deciding the necessary competencies ... aiming to make useful people for this economic system...”	Technical training, serving the market	Technocratic and functional orientation
(E2, Quantitative Methods, p. 1)	“... the most distinguishing advantage of the competency model, unlike the traditional model, underlined the need of not becoming a repetition level as the traditional system did but an implementation system... it aims to demonstrate that one has the necessary skills in order to demonstrate the management of this knowledge”	“underlined the need of not becoming a repetition level as the traditional system did but an implementation system... demonstrate that one really manage this knowledge”	Practical implementation meaning	Functional, labor and behavioral orientation

Outcomes.

Due to space issues, we will only present the most representative trends of the conducted investigations within the three axes considered for the analysis, based on some of the professors' arguments in order to support the performed interpretations.

Implementation/Non-Implementation of the Competency-Based Education.

On Table 2 we can observe that the tendency on the professors opinion concerning the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach during their educational practice, does not balances in favor of its implementation, whereas the 65.7% (23 professors) reject it and the 34.3% (12 professors) approve it. However, we found out that most of the professors of the Social Applied Psychology area approve and implement it. Meanwhile, none of the professors of the Social and Theoretical Psychology and the Clinical Psychology approve it.

In other words, it is likely to prevail a preference or rejection towards the approach in some of the academic spheres of the specialty, whilst, in other areas, the positions are virtually divided.

Table 2.

Distribution of professors that approve or reject the competency-based model divided per area, gender, working schedule and service.

Academic area	Number of professors that approve/ implement the CBE	Number of professors that reject/ do not implement the CBE	Gender		Working schedule			Working Service
			M	F	Mor.	Nig	Mixed	
Social Applied	4	1	2	3	3	1	1	13-35 years
Social Theoretical		6	2	4	5		1	2 months-35 years
Quantitative Methods	1	2	2	1	3			21-33 years
Clinical Psychology		4		4	1		3	2-21 years
Special Education and Rehabilitation	2	2	2	2	2		2	4-28 years
Development And Education	1	2	2	1	2		1	6 months-39 years
Methodology Human	1	1		2	1		1	20-30 years
Experimental Animal	2	3	2	3	4		1	28-32 years
Experimental	1	2	1	2	1		2	9-30 years
TOTAL	12	23	15	20	22	3	10	2 months-39 years
N = 35	(34.3%)	(65.7%)						

A distinguishing feature is the kind of representations and meanings the professors assigned to the approach concerning its approval or rejection. Apparently, prior contents and professional background from the different working areas and subjects of the professor may influence their representations towards the approach. For instance, professors approving the approach that come from the Social Applied area are more likely to implement it, aiming

to promote practical experiences among their students and enabling them to use this knowledge during their future professional practice:

I consider this model is important for me if a student acquire a competency or skill while we are implementing practices... Sometimes as a teacher during the practice, one can implement it and offer some balance to the students [...] the students, at least the ones I talk to, say they are working on the intervention processes in their workplaces since they already acquire this experience with me, they learned about group-work or organizing work with elementary level students, it has been hard but at the end they achieved the goal (E3, Social Applied, p.2).

Others, value the development of attitudes resulting from the approach:

I am a humanist psychologist, I mostly work with attitude competencies, how being empathetic and assertive, and having a professional ethic (E1, Social Applied, p.1).

On the other hand, for professors from the Social Theoretical area, rejecting the approach, the problem resides in the fact that this “only educate technicians... it is a clear idea to end with humanities” instead of “educating thinkers or scientists” necessary to reach efficiency levels:

I do not agree with the model, it is bringing an end to the intelligence of Mexicans; it will ultimately finish with this. [...] Competency fosters technocratic thinking; therefore it will now allow one to seek for deeper relations since it implies thinking and later, thinking causes headache... in my opinion, it is not useful to educate people able to make proposals, seek for solutions; functional people in a company, in other words cheap labor force (E12, Social Theoretical, p.1,3).

However, thinking, analyzing, criticizing and self-reflecting becomes a common aim to be encouraged among students for professors of the practical and the theoretical practice, as happens with clinical psychology professors that reject or do not implement the approach:

I do not directly implement the approach, not in the established way [...] I am keen on questioning about concepts, developing a critical analysis with a robust and consistent base, making an accurate critic, as well as self-analysis...that they implement in their own lives. I encourage it. If you cannot apply this psychology in your own life then it is silly psychology (E25, Clinical Psychology, pp. 1,2).

According to Coll (2007), every specific psychology area considers as their own, different contents and knowledge. Furthermore, the acquisition or development of competencies, due to their implicit nature, is strongly connected to the acquisition or mobilization of a series of resources – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – that will vary depending on every discipline, area, program or subject and the professional education profile. Nevertheless, for social psychology as a social science, the *intention* has a major role in the study of human action and thinking. In this way, the assessment of the attitudinal competencies becomes highly important on any specialization areas of Psychology.

Representations against the Competency Approach.

Although we found positions in favor of and against the Competency-Based Approach among the interviewed professors, the balance leans towards the group rejecting it. Despite there are diverse rejecting representations, most of them are related to the business and technical fields and the inconvenient of implementing the approach in the practice.

Global and Technocratic Orientation.

Generally talking, the arguments expressed by the teachers rejecting the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach revolve around the fact that it responds to the globalization needs and, considering their connection to neo-liberal policies and the business world, it raises suspicions among professors:

I reject it, apparently with the current political conditions in Mexico, there is a need for not thinking people but with a good level of technological knowledge, as if they were technicians; the educational system has been modified according to the globalization current needs (E8, Social Applied, p. 1).

... concerning the competency-based model, I am worried about its connection with an educational policy that is directed to a technical education... it allows the market to define which are the suitable competencies to educate a person that can be useful to the economic system...(E7, Development and Education, p. 1).

These arguments coincide with the some of the most controversial topics already exposed in different publications. It has been documented by specialists that the competency issues within the working activities in the world, are the result of strategies adopted to increase the competitiveness among companies in a context of a global economy demanding new professional profiles; in order to face the economic and social pressures of the world processes derived from a *knowledge society* under the supervision of the information and communication technologies (Climent, 2009; Diaz-Barriga, 2011; Planas-Coll, 2013).

Implementation Problems.

For other professors rejecting the competency-based approach, the problem resides in the complexity to implement it during their classes. For others, the predicament is related to the emerging resistance when facing any education innovation:

We live embedded in a context not decoupled from the traditional education approaches, in my opinion, its implementation is not likely to be a viable alternative [...] it would be necessary to change the deepest formative structure of professors, in other words, from the beginning, from the roots and from the way they prepare to become professors. They would need training and awareness campaigns to comprehend this new teaching method (E1, Social Applied, pp. 1-2).

For other people, the problem resides in their unfamiliarity with the approach or its behavioral base:

I believe the competency-based model is not fully understood; just a few individuals have a complete comprehension of it. Most people debate from an ignorant viewpoint. The debate emerges from the fact that this model is highly behavioral, hence, many people reject it (E9, Human Experimental, p. 1).

For other people, the problem resides in the students since they come to university without developing any previous competency at school:

I agree just if it is applied to the first school years, there must be a generation prepared in this way. In my opinion, it is too hard to deal with learning competencies during higher education; it is not currently working (E11, Human Experimental, pp. 1-2).

Some people declare they do not implement the approach because it is not approved by their institution: “I do not use it because I work with the current program of the H. Technical Council” (E5, Methodology, p. 1).

Clearly, the problems expressed by these professors reflect the challenge that the Competency-Based Approach is confronting. On the one hand, resides the resistance to the change that, as in any educational innovation, affect the labor, tasks, activities and interests of the professors. On the other hand, there is a need of clarifying this proposal by developing a language that involves the proposal itself and its limits. In this regard, Diaz Barriga (2006) revised the conceptual foundation of the term *competency* as well as some related experiences in some Mexican educational scopes and; by means of an article where analyzes if this approach really represents an innovation or is a disguise of change. He finds that there is a lack of conceptual reflection concerning the Competency-Based Approach as an educational innovation or, at least, a conceptual and technical domain of the meaning itself. This is essential in order to produce the adaptations that every educational reality demands. In general, he observes that the actions related to the approach

are not implemented with consistency. As noted in every innovation of the Mexican education system, it is likely to be a verbal statement rather than an action from the professors based on their conviction towards the relevance of the approach or, at least, on a technical and conceptual domain of the term itself. Therefore, he warns that the only certainty we currently have is that the application of the approach in the basic or higher education is not yet clear (p.17).

It is essential avoiding such an extended scope of interpretations within the field of education. In addition, when reaching an agreement about its conceptualization and comprehension, it will be necessary counting with clear instructions and concrete formulation for the definition, design, organization and implementation of a study plan or program.

Representations in Favor of the Competency-Based Approach.

Although the group approving the competency teaching approach is smaller, their reasons to implement it and conferred meanings are also diverse. Some of the most outstanding arguments are the promoted technical and practical knowledge and its alignment with the labor market needs. Some individuals underline the approach systematic and constructive view, concerning its procedures, conceptual knowledge and attitudes.

Its Functional, Labor and Behavioral Orientation.

Contrary to the conceptualization of the professors rejecting the competency teaching model based on its practical value and relation with the demands of the labor market, other teachers appreciate these features and strongly support the approach.

Apparently, the Competency-Based Approach from a functional¹, labor and behavioral point of view, emphasizes the need of translating competencies into objective evidences through the “know-how to do and know-how to

be”. Hence, the rote-knowledge is discarded and the priority falls back into the “implementation” under performance criteria and evidences underlying a practical know-how:

The most important advantage of the competency model, unlike the traditional one, focuses on the need of not becoming a rote-learning level but an implementation one... it aims to display the necessary skills to demonstrate a real knowledge management (E2, Quantitative Methods, p.1).

In my opinion it is functional because before, we used rote-learning, taking notes and report writing, meaningless actions, it was a very plain work [...] the concept of competency must be related to acquiring certain skills that imply investigation autonomy and problem solving, I do not push this aside, we have to recover the functional aspect (E27, Development and Education, p. 1).

In this way, the CBE can be seen as the approach enabling the resolution of constant problems in our educational system such as the rote-learning that can be applied in schools but not in the real life of students. Instead, this approach focuses on solving problems through the development of the necessary competencies for the current social fields (Diaz Barriga, 2011).

The arguments to justify the implementation of this approach in the national education become very extensive and are related to another argument even more extended which is “education for life” (Vaca, Aguilar, Gutierrez, Cano & Bustamante, 2015).

This CBE perspective is promoted by the Definition and Selection of Competences Project (DeSeCo, 2005) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which aims to confront the pressures of the market economy and the international concern for the current reformation of the unsatisfactory education systems. Departs from a behavioral/labor concept focused on, as stated by Moreno (2009), “the results obtained by an individual by means of an action, decision or behavior regarding imposed demands, such as a specific professional position, a social role or a determined personal project (p. 72)”.

The students become competent once they get involved in the market, then they have to be aware of what they would be facing out there, it is not useful if they just say they know what to do, they really have to implement it (E14, Especial Education and Rehabilitation p. 2).

However, the meaning and implementation given to the Competency-Based Approach will depend on the school of thought adopting the competency curriculum proposal and, in our case, the professors' point of view.

Inclusive and Constructivist Orientation in the Education.

Even though they are only a few, there are professors that appreciate the Competency-Based Approach from a more systemic and constructivist perception of education. Professors promoting a more integrative education, enabling the comprehension and explanation of a phenomenon and not necessarily preparing, judging or assessing students based on the direct application of the learnt knowledge. In other words, these professors take distance from the Competency-Based Approach that promotes an education strictly and exclusively "to work".

Because it allow them to think, synthetize, implement, be creative, perform or even better, promote attitudes implying values that enable them to achieve adequate social skills (E17, Social Applied, p.2).

The constructivist perspective of the competency-based approach emerges from the impacts on education as a reflection of the global era of the education systems, not from the market needs. We can trace its origin to the Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches which produced a different point of view of the competency-work in education. It underlined, through some authors, the relevance of the learning-centered approaches and the role of the school and the teacher when using and creating spaces that enable students to construct their own information and knowledge structure, departing from the approach to cognitive objects, (Diaz Barriga, 2011). The consistent testimony of another professor:

I highly encourage reflection, I prefer debating cases individually, offering my advice and when they are working on the cases I ask about the background of the child and the family, the problem area then I began a brainstorm and the students start the analysis [...] if they disconnect from the changing and dynamic reality, some deficiencies and setbacks emerge (E6, Special Education and Rehabilitation, pp.3, 1).

From this perspective, the learning context becomes more important since it is not enough to integrate the produced knowledge to new situations but also the new demands of the reality operate as context of new learning. This is not a recent perspective in education, it responds to the same knowledge construction logic of the proposal implying learning by projects, problems, cases or the situated learning whose basis can be traced to the thought of Dewey and subsequently, to the diverse approaches of the genetic psychology and the sociocultural theory. It positions the Competency-Based approach with a distant profile from a functional, behavioral and labor perspective.

Debate

As a study case, we did not aim to obtain neither conclusive nor exhaustive conclusions with this research. Our purpose was investigating if the Competency-Based Approach would represent, for the psychology teachers of a specific university sphere, an alternative for the resolution of problems related to their teaching practice. To this effect, the findings are only contextual and local however, they aim to contribute with the knowledge and the debate or controversies emerged from its implementation in virtually all the educational levels in Mexico.

The notion of social representations as a concept and unit of analysis was essential to approximate the professors' thoughts about the Competency-Based Approach and the meanings assigned to the approach. They have a practical projection, they are not simple attitudes towards the facts but instead they possess an active component projecting the action that enabled

us to get deeply involved in their pedagogical practice operation. In other words, they are not only tools for comprehending and interpreting the reality; they are also a planning and control system. Therefore, they are related actions or activities of interaction with the environment and influence the professors' thoughts concerning their labor and how they assign meanings to their beliefs through their actions in class (p. 2), as stated by Tabachnick and Zeichner (1982, quoted by Gimeno, 1995).

The gender, working service and schedule of the professors participating in this research seem to have no relation with the Competency-Based Approach approval or rejection. Even though we found out a relation between some of academic areas and the approach approval or rejection, we concluded it is not a condition present in all the areas.

The diversity within the Competency-Based Approach representations and conceptualizations considered in the literature and debates, also emerged in this investigation. In general, the professors tend to the rejection instead of approving the approach. Most of them consider this is a functionalist, behavioral and business model, being these features involved in the critics stated by curriculum specialists in their debates and questionings. These representations and critics seem to be originated from the association or connection of the Competency-Based Approach with the neo-liberal policies that subordinate the education to the needs of the labor market. The term *competencies* seem to come from the labor market field but it has been transferred to the education sphere even when this term has a different perspective on each field.

Nevertheless, beyond the connection of the term with the working sphere, this perspective may offer more articulation possibilities between the education and the labor market. This fact may reduce the gap between the education of the psychologist and the working and social needs of our society. When emphasizing the relevance of the professional performance of the individuals, priority is given to the “know-how to do and know-how to be” aiming to reduce the rote-learning which is a problem attributed to

the teaching practice of psychology. However, there are fewer professors that agree with this perspective; they believe it is necessary the connection education-work in the professional training of psychologists.

Apparently, there is no agreement on the representation or comprehension of the Competency-Based Approach or in the overview among professors of the psychology as career. However, there are some professors supporting the approach from a constructivist perspective; they are concerned for the integral education of their students not for reducing the gap between the professional education and the labor market needs. This condition confirms not only the different ways to represent the Competency-Based Approach but the professional education as well which hinders being able to count with a united perspective concerning the objectives and purposes of higher education. The great diversity within the professional education and the curriculum innovations is a constant issue related to any educational research as well as the implications entailed for the success of pedagogical innovations.

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