

# TEACHERS' IDENTITY AND THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS' DYNAMICS.

**Gustavo Cortez Félix**  
Universidad de Sonora  
gustavo\_ecf@hotmail.com

**Blanca A. Valenzuela**  
Universidad de Sonora  
blancav@sociales.uson.mx

**Manuela Guillén Lúgigo**  
Universidad de Sonora  
mguillen@sociales.uson.mx

## ABSTRACT

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## INTRODUCTION

In studies of education and sociology of education, research has drawn attention to the contemporary educational processes and social contexts in which these occur, ranging from two highly separated approaches, micro-local and macrostructural (Granja, 2001), from a didactic interaction in a classroom to the socioeconomic implications of the national education system. Because of this, an intermediate approach is relevant, while studies of educational institutions, their level of organization and academic development, appear to be in the middle of the two positions.

Looking at the university as an organization, Tenti (2010) notes that it provides certain resources, which frames the action within a set of rules, that has certain traditions and an institutional culture, that are influential at the moment of accomplishing the educational objectives, being therefore important, to know the type of organization in which teachers develop their work but also being able to individually and collectively generate those most favorable institutional arrangements to achieving the objectives proposed by the educational effort. This is first subheading. This is first subheading.

In this sense, Kezar and Ecker (2004) conducted a comprehensive review from the first works to the latest literature on higher education in its dimension of organization or

institution, finding that studies have focused on the structural elements that allow governance and the fulfillment of the objectives of educational institutions, but also, that those studies reduce the importance of cognitive, social and cultural aspects, recommending to use the latter in combination with systemic and structural perspectives for a better understanding of the institutions. Rightly, the authors argue that the first approach is insufficient as it does not reveal the dynamics of the agents and groups that form the institutions.

For Zabalza (2002), to know an institution material and formal structure or the legal framework, is to poorly understand it, and to stay only in that means ignoring what the university really is and how it works: what the institution has of instituted and of instituting, its tensions and resolutions, and the patterns of power distribution, the relationships between people and functions, among others.

In addition, it is a common agreement that, perhaps as in no other institution, the teacher plays a major role in the university, it is easy to reaffirm this position if we understand that the capabilities and potentialities for teaching, research, creating art and reproducing culture; that teachers have, are the capacities and potentialities of the universities. Neither the regulations nor the infrastructure will make the university what it is or make it socially relevant. Therefore the teacher is a potential

stronghold or even a threat to educational institutions.

But often the real profile, identities, practices, and customs and traditions of teachers are unknown, researchers and teachers assume to know and understand them, because they are part of their routine, nevertheless, without denying their intuition, these understandings are based upon merely perceptions and do not have any scientific basis. Perhaps they are afraid of being as Bourdieu (2008) once described, "An intellectual master of reflection who reflects on himself and in doing so, helps to destroy himself qua master".

In this spirit, we present a conceptual approach to address a higher education institution taking into account the structural dimension and the critical processes or incidents in the dynamics and functioning of the institution, which may have helped to shape the teachers' identity.

### **Relevance of the proposal**

The importance of the studies that can derive from such perspective, are socially relevant as result from the elucidation of identifying the processes and critical incidents of the dynamics of educational institutions affecting teachers, it can give support on how to plan and conduct university academic work or even cast doubt about the current state of the matter.

Given that in the different activities established to achieve the objectives of education systems, there are real people and therefore those activities are subscribed to their identities; to know how the processes and critical incidents in the institutional dynamics and the teachers profile makes us able to detect processes that have an impact on institutional performance and the performance of the teachers, and can facilitate or obstruct the achievement of the objectives of educational institutions and to some extent determine their quality.

With a knowledge of these factors, those who develop or are subject to policies and academic programs, will have a body of knowledge that would reflect the implications in the programmatic, political, socio-professional, academic and scientific level, etc., that are present when implementing policies and programs, thus facilitating the decision-making process and the project development, while departing from the real profile of teachers and new quality indicators focusing on the teachers

and not the products quantitative aspect of the policies and guidelines .

On the other hand, in response to the need expressed by Kezar and Ecker (2004), described above, this type of research raises the possibility to approach new knowledge which integrates perspectives of the agent and the structure of educational institutions. At the same time, studies based on this or similar proposals, promise a theoretical and methodological integrative view that provides knowledge for different disciplines interested in the phenomena that takes place within educational institutions.

### **EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS' CONTEXT**

The university should be understood as a subsystem of society, as a living social organism that is beyond any kind of formal representation because of its internal dynamic feeds on a set of interactions and influences and not from the formal labels that correspond to each system component (Zabalza, 2002).

However, the first step to delineate the university as an subject of study and intervention, the contextual character and defines the way in their general characteristics that define the framework in which institutional processes and actions are produced and from which there is necessarily observe the university.

Following Gewerc and Montero (1996) the formal component of the organizational context has to do with the social purpose of the institution and its sub-institutions within the same, its politics and divisions of labor, the way it is organized, micro-political aspects, while, beliefs, conflict and a set of meanings also help to shape the organization of the university as an educational institution, the latter have more to do with the informal component.

The formal and structural component prescribes actions to each of the agents and instances, also, the structure-governance and the political dimension not only create certain individual and collective behaviors trends, those place agents in power structures, or create them giving context to power struggles which lead to relational processes. In addition to these, from the formal components also arise the mechanisms that delineate the governance, performance towards institutional goals, resulting in formal and informal

practices related to the academia, science and culture. The informal and relational elements that emerge from the interactions and influences are part of the dynamic component of institutions.

In other words, patterns of operation based on the formal and legal structure of the institution are being established, but that also overflow it growing on the relational processes within the institution itself, with its implicit or explicit components. These relational processes are part of the dynamic component of institutions.

This dialectic between formal aspects and non formal or relational, present in the institutional dynamics of the universities determine the action and appear as an inevitable framework of conditions for the same, and function as a first mechanism to establish rites and beliefs at the institutional level, for example: procedures of recruitment and promotion, shared ideas on students, learning theories and teaching models in the curriculum, and so on. These processes and events are essential for the construction of common spaces on which to build an identity based on the subjects that shape it, however not all are equally important, some events stand out for being critical in the way they influence the identity construction.

### **CRITICAL PROCESSES AND INCIDENTES**

In history, talking about processes and critical incidents for the historical development has always been delicate. The different conceptions of history and philosophy do not agree about the role played by certain incidents in the causal development of what is known as history. According to Mahoney and Schensul (2006), some perspectives, perhaps obsolete, focus on fixed sequences of events with clear effects, unique conditions to produce some change, other perspectives talk about contingencies and reactions among processes and incidents with no delimiters even recognizing that they can be unpredictable and fuzzy.

The problem of not defining critical events or processes in history, at least as a general principle, has implications for the rest of the social sciences. For example, in sociology, processes of social change are generally understood as a succession of events that over time, produces changes and replaces patterns or specific social units for new ones (Sekulic, 2007), but the relevance in some or other processes and the ways to address them,

depends on the theory that is generally extensively associated with a perspective historical of understanding

These processes are studied by the causal analysis, in which relations between actors and objects involved in a social relationship, and their historical construction, are searched. The macro perspectives focus on general relations, such as in the Marxist theory, about the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While in micro-history, is relevant to reflect the lives of individuals and institutions more or less defined in space and time. For example, Eisenstadt (1964) based social change on institutions of differentiation, crystallized roles and cultural orientations that don't necessarily rely on social change principles; these are subject to the spatiotemporal circumstances of a micro or macro social system.

In the latter group of perspectives, a theory is especially relevant as the approach for the conceptual body of this proposal, the social theory of life course mainly developed by Elder. The theory and methodology proposed by Elder (2001), focuses on the lives of individuals, structural contexts (formal and non formal components of institutions) and social changes. The course of life is understood as a sequence of events and socially defined roles that the individual represent over time, to know these is necessary to address individual trajectories and the point where the personal and structural changes of institutions or contexts converge.

From the psychological point of view, related to Elders theory, and in the educational context, Monereo and Badia (2011) report that incidents become critical when these happen in relation to some predetermined activity, but for its effects on the person, those constitute an event or major milestone in certain context, and reflected on the subjective structure of individuals. As examples they refer to a teacher who is facing a multicultural classroom for the first time and has no useful strategies or training, a teacher who has to let go a co-worker from a team project for his lack of participation, to be asked to investigate and publish instead of teaching; finding contrary views to his colleagues on the need for change and innovation, being affected by an inequitable distribution of resources for support and so on.

Following Contreras, Monereo and Badia (2010) when the teacher faces a negative critical incident, his personal stability is given

away to uncertainty, inhibiting and perhaps aggression, affect him and putting his identity in crisis, since teachers may not account with the resources that allow them to face the critical incident in a timely and appropriate way, questioning in what they have said, felt, thought and or done. However, being understood as this, these events would detract from the potential to become a usable resource in the continuing education of the school's faculty, there are also positive critical incidents, such as a teacher: getting a better work contract or a raise, when his student thesis wins a national award, when he gets major funding for research, etc.

According to Burnard (2005) trajectories of teachers are marked by incidents and counter- incidents affecting the identity that they construct as these incidents become relevant milestones with a cognitive, social and or emotional impact, and put the teacher in a conflict situation, they become significant and destabilizing events.

Destabilizing because identities are not rigid entities, are not possessed, they are in a constant construction, according to Dubar (2002) identity is the result of both stable and temporary, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, different socialization processes that collectively are constructed by individuals and defined by institutions.

The identity has a dynamic and continuous transformation characteristic, which shows a permanence and stability over time and is the product of the interaction with others in a continuous process of construction or reconstruction, formed at a time, from the adherence to standards, result a of a continuous biographical and relational processes (Gonzalez, Rio y Rosales, 2001). In the case of teachers, they develop pedagogical beliefs that guide their actions in the classroom and respond to the socio-educative context in which they are inserted.

In relation to the critical processes for Bolivar, Fernandez Molina (2005), these represent drastic changes in the socio-educational context, which can lead to a crisis of identity, which is also part of the identity construction process. The crisis in teacher identity is given to the extent that, training and teaching practice that has shaped their professional knowledge, cannot longer respond to new demands and functions, social change and students. It is an expression of a way to

safeguard one's professional identity, as the teacher sees it as seriously threatened.

For Dubar (2002), the crisis manifests itself with a variety of symptoms in a evident demoralization and discomfort of the faculty, which seriously affects the goals of public education.

The strategy most widely used methodology for process studies and critical incidents and studies of identity in the case of teachers has been primarily qualitative and based on the professional careers or trajectories of teachers, see Monereo and Badia (2011) or Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2003). Precisely the latter authors conducted a review of the literature on teacher identity published between 1988 and 2000, with a total of 22 articles that appeared in scientific search services of impact, finding agreement in the methodological approaches but a difference in conceptual definitions, they found that several studies seek to find elements that modify and build the professional identity of teachers in a changing socio-in the context.

The conception of identity referenced, induces to consider studies through the professional careers of teachers, their particular history within the institution, this means the need to use two approaches at the same time (Gewerc, 2001), regarding to the situation of the teacher and the teaching job, and histories of teachers in the critical processes and incidents.

## **AN INTER-MULTI DISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

Due to the nature of the conceptual and inquiry method previously referred, it is necessary to look for a common ground that allows the integration of the ontological, epistemological and the methodological dimensions (Lincoln and Guba, 1994) to avoid the possibility of working upon a construction and assumptions that are not valid for they incoherence in the theoretical-methodological approaches among the relevant disciplines.

This requires deep reflection on the subject of study and so being able to detect the disciplines that besides being relevant are capable of contributing to the construction of knowledge and to retrieve some from it.

Following Repko (2008) it is necessary to use a model of scientific practice that integrates perspectives of understanding to increase the knowledge from different disciplines, but also a strategy of disciplinary interpenetration is

needed, one in which the categories and concepts are understood and addressed by the disciplines and sub-disciplines that naturally share borders within the structure of the scientific knowledge/practice, with the aim of bring closer those limits while increasing knowledge.

The strategies to follow involve a non-reductionist view and the redefinition of variables in common grounds from the relevant disciplines; at a first and early glance, psychology, sociology, communication, public policy and politics could be central disciplines from where researchers may get relevant explanatory frameworks and methods. It is important to note that depending on how far and deep studies are developed, it will become necessary to work on a model, metaphor or narrative that describes the paths taken as well as the recommended ones, for the clear interdisciplinary understanding intended.

This way, we present a sequential integration strategy working on three levels (Kezar and Eckel, 2010), with descriptions from different disciplines, theoretical and methodological integration and with the development of a comprehension strategy.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The theoretical perspective presented invites to think deeply about the possibilities of research strategies derived from this proposal. It is necessary to deepen the conceptual aspects that require educational studies institutions and teachers. However the proposal pretends to be a first approach to a new point of understanding about the phenomena and processes. It is also necessary to test the theoretical and methodological utility, even in different contexts, since although we talk about teachers in this paper; the conceptual baggage is applicable to other individuals at other institutions.

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