OBSERVATIONS ON THE APPROACH BY COMPETENCIES AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Observaciones al enfoque por competencias y su relación con la calidad educativa

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Abstract

This work analyzes the relationship between competencies and educational quality, to know the context in which they emerge, their characteristics and the meaning of this relationship; from the bibliographic review, positions that denote a tendency to the labor market are revealed, and thus a question arises if it is possible to establish another relationship between them. The methodology used is the documentary hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts with an analytical-critical approach. One of the main results obtained is that the concept of competence is adaptable to any discipline, approach, tendency or motivations, and its main characteristic is its instrumental sense, and thus in the educational context it is necessary to interpret the intentions behind its practice. In addition, international organizations play a political and influential role in the different models that have been considered. As main conclusions, it is postulated that the approach by competencies and the achievement of quality are a natural response of the context for greater productivity in the bureaucratization of social institutions, with education directed to these parameters; for this reason, it is proposed to adopt a quality model as a transformation of the subjects beyond quality as a purpose of accountability, which would lead to a change in the evaluative tendencies in the competence-quality relationship.

Keywords

Competencies, quality, evaluation, instrumental reason, development of thought, labor market.

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Resumen

Este trabajo analiza la relación entre competencias y calidad educativa, para conocer el contexto en el cual emergen, sus características y el sentido de esta relación; donde a partir de la revisión bibliográfica se desvelan posturas que denotan una tendencia al mercado laboral, por ello se plantea la pregunta si es posible otra relación entre ellas. La metodología empleada es la hermenéutica documental, la interpretación de textos con un enfoque analítico-crítico. Entre los principales resultados se tiene que el concepto de competencia es adaptable a cualquier disciplina, enfoque, tendencia o motivaciones, siendo su principal característica el sentido instrumental que posee, por ello en el contexto educativo hay que interpretar las intenciones que están detrás de su práctica, teniendo presente que organismos internacionales juegan un papel político e influyente en los distintos modelos que han llegado a plantearse. Como principales conclusiones, se postula que el enfoque por competencias y la consecución de la calidad son una respuesta natural del contexto para una mayor productividad en la burocratización de las instituciones sociales, siendo la educación dirigida a estos parámetros; por ello se propone adoptar un modelo de calidad como transformación de los sujetos más allá de una calidad como finalidad de rendición de cuentas, esto resultaría en un cambio en las tendencias evaluativas en la relación competencias-calidad.

Palabras clave

Competencias, calidad, evaluación, razón instrumental, desarrollo del pensamiento, mercado laboral.

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Introduction

This study addresses the concept of competence in the educational context and its relationship with quality; some observations will be pointed out as limitations of this interaction. This concept is conceived as problematic, due to the accumulation of studies about it. The most common critic is that the concept does not have pedagogical base and foundations, and despite this curricular approaches and models have been developed.

At this point, it should be recognized the significance and importance of competencies, whose presence is not for free and they have even been shown as the panacea of educational problems in the last twenty years. However, there should be some concern about a model that is presented as universal and valid for various contexts, and so this paper intends to know the limits of the concept of competence in its development and application, reviewing theoretical and practical proposals from both international organizations and academic studies.

It should be pointed out that competencies and quality share some vocabulary: skills, abilities, indicators, standards, etc.; the issue lies on knowing the emergence of these phenomena, and based on their interaction, knowing what is the role of evaluation, how does it manifest and in how many ways?; and if the competencies-quality relationship has a single identity or characterization, which has been interpreted as an accountability linked to labor and market interests, the following question

may be posed: is it possible to postulate a different relationship and under which foundations?

In the view of this problematic, a critical vision is a position that enables revealing possible difficulties or problems, in affinity with the observations made by Sacristán and Álvarez (2009) who considered that education should not only respond to economical and utilitarian interests, and thus Habermas (1987) and Horkheimer (2002) thinking about instrumental reasoning and criticism to the pragmatism of the societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is used here, and the postulates of Critical Theory constitute the positioning of this paper.

The field of literature of competencies and of the concept of quality is wide, since there are studies of competencies around creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, sustainable development, etc.; any interdisciplinary field that may be embedded in the educational context. Arteaga (2015) has a clear position in these inquiries, which is the relevance of the approach by competencies in the educational field for success at work; in contrast, Sacristán and Álvarez (2009) and Barnett (2001) reject the instrumental character of competencies and the confidence on them as a mean for a true education. On the other hand, Tobón (2015) avoids reductionisms of the model of competencies in the work environment. There is also emphasis on the development of this approach by international organizations, mainly the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with its project: Definition and selection of competencies (DESECO), where Rychen and Salganik (2000) point out that its aim is the sustainable development in an integral education of individuals beyond just the economic, statement that is questioned by the previous authors; finally, the contributions of these organizations are rescued in the World Education Forum 2015, in the formulation of the Education 2030 Framework for Action.

Regarding the methodological aspect, the documentary hermeneutics has been used in the analysis and interpretation of texts with a critical analytic position. According to this methodology, Gutiérrez cited by Pérez et al. (2019), starts with the interpretation of the phenomenon, in this case the approach by competencies, and then moves to its understanding. For Pérez et al. (2019), hermeneutics assumes a triple dynamic, the first, involves grabbing the reality under investigation, known as 'the text', which in this study corresponds to the literature around competencies in the educational context, where it is found theoretical proposals, such as the proposals developed by international organizations, and practical proposals, in tracking pedagogical approaches for developing

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competencies; at last, there are research studies around the category of educational quality. Continuing with Pérez et al. (2009), "the second dynamic of the hermeneutic methodology is the context, the place where the phenomenon is located, and finally the pretext, that enables seeing its intentionality, its path" (p. 28). For this author "the hermeneutic methodology involves a serious, methodic and profound work that exceeds the descriptive or assessment plane, it goes inside the thing in itself to know its real meanings in its context and symbolic networks" (p. 28); in this way, this study will seek to achieve a critical and objective vision, identifying the context and the relationships of the concept of competencies with educational quality.

This paper starts with remarks about the concept of competence, highlighting its problematic character and proposing a historical review from its intentional application in the education field; the contribution by McClelland is highlighted due to its referral to education, and then the reviews and adoptions of the concept by international organizations are considered, where the critics made by Sacristán and Álvarez are broached; then, it follows the analysis of the process of competencies formulation and how these relate to educational quality. The role of evaluation in this quality – competencies relationship will be highlighted, to finally expose a vision of quality that responds to the transformation of individuals and the discussion with other approaches to the problem raised.

The concept of competence

Different definitions of competence may be found in a literature review, but, which is the base notion of the concept? Is the know-how an activity or a set of activities to perform successfully in a particular situation? Many observations, nuances and genealogies have been added and pointed out to this reductionism, an example of which is the work by Tobón (2015); however, for this study, it has been considered relevant to pay attention to the development by McClelland and the OECD, because their proposals have been directly and intentionally related in the educational field.

References to behaviorism and linguistics may be found in the different genealogies of the concept, with Chomsky being one of the first references; it should be emphasized that the intention of this author is the understanding rather than a practical stance of competencies. According to Tiza (2016), Hymes with communicative competence and Canelle with discursive competence may be cited in the same line; their implica-

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tions on education, specifically the didactic, will be performed by secondary players. The term competence was academically used for the first time in English language, and the referred word is *competence* with different connotation than *competition*, now, the root of *competence* comes from the Latin word *competere* that refers to the performance to successfully achieve a particular activity, which is the base notion of the concept in all its definitions, a notion different than the meaning of competition.

Following on from the foregoing, the concept of competencies should not represent any difficulty, but what has been done is to make it complex due to the diverse contributions from different disciplines and approaches that adopt and configure them, an example of which is the complexity-competencies relationship, the imbrication between the philosophy of Edgar Morin and this concept, carried out by Tobón (2015). This author intends to unveil the sense of competencies, from the conceptual framework of complexity or, if it is allowed to enunciate it in this way, from a complex methodology, where he rather begs the question, add to competencies categories of interdisciplinarity, solidarity, socio-cultural integration, self-realization, etc., thus transforming the concept where there is more of Morin's epistemology than of the concept itself; it is worth noting that it intends to be disregarded of any labor and economic reductionism.

The remark made to Tobón extends to other conceptualizations of this concept in the educational context; thus, to criticize, to carry out a deep study to find possible limitations or observations, it is necessary to study the initial proposals of the approach by competencies.

The approach by competencies from McClelland

Proceeding historically, one should start from the study by McClelland; according to Guerrero and Clavero (2004), the intentionality of applying it in the educational field follows from it. In *Testing for competence rather than for intelligence*, McClelland (1973) criticizes the evaluation system for admission to universities and success in the work environment, and emphasizes that tests have limitations to determine the skills of applicants thus exercising a stigmatizing and mutilating evaluation. This author points out the existence of a weak relationship between the abilities measured by the tests, the level of education achieved and success in life.

Thus, McClelland (1973) points out that skills should be assessed beyond cognitive estimations, other forms of evaluation should be con-

sidered focused on the know how that is reflected in skills, abilities or actions, the aforementioned form of evaluation would disregard such capabilities. This author criticizes the performance within the work environment, where a theoretical training would have little relevance for success at work, it would rather be the practice or the skills what determines such success; thus, he proposes to train in the know how through competencies starting from higher education.

McClelland (1973) points out that there is a risk of falling in an extreme specification of occupational criteria when formulating competencies, and so he proposes to develop social competencies such as leadership and interpersonal skills (p. 9), highlighting the following:

- Communicational skills
- Patience
- Setting of moderate goals
- Development of ego (Refers to passing through states from a passive and conformist person to another capable of taking initiatives)

It should be remarked that for this author the competencies and their use are of temporary nature with the potential of improving them in the future as well as losing them.

Tobón (2015) exposes that the movement *Competency-Based Education and Training* (CBET), "focused on improving teaching competencies and strategies with the objective of articulating education with social and economic challenges" (p. 56), arises from this tendency. In the 1970s and 1980s, this tendency linked to the economic and labor field, had influence in the emergence of projects aimed at improving the qualification and accreditation of workers' competencies; these programs still exist.

Competencies approached by international organizations

Despite the study by McClelland, labor psychology, linguistics, educational sciences, the influence and significance of the approach by competencies has reached various contexts due to international organizations, such as OECD, due to size the of its political capital. The analysis and formulation of the concept of competence made by this organization, which even has its own program for this task, the DESECO, is close to what has been proposed by McClelland, competencies training for labor insertion and

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success, with its focus of interest being the social whole, competencies training for sustainable development.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action was stated in 2015, in the World Education Forum, where the aforementioned organization, the World Bank, UNICEF and others took part; 1600 representatives from 160 countries were present. According to UNESCO et al. (2015), the global objective of this Framework for Action was set as "guarantee an inclusive and equitable quality education and promote learning opportunities for all" (p. 3). With respect to quality, it is established that one of its goals is to impart competencies for decent work, employment and entrepreneurship, where tertiary education and universities play an essential role.

The use of the concept of competencies in the Incheon declaration in the World Education Forum 2015 covers many aspects such as equality, quality learning, management of ICTs, etc.; this does not represent a definition as such, and hence there is no marked tendency with respect to it, simply the instrumental value that it may have and one of them tends to the labor market.

The OECD is an organization born under the principles of economic cooperation, and in the course of its history it has had interest on education and environment, in which it has the collaboration and alliances in world forums. It is worth mentioning that its primary function is the exchange of information for economic development of member countries, however, the club of rich countries, as it is often called, does not present in its educational literature a hierarchy between economic and social aspects, and despite this there are suspicions and criticism before an economic organization that has more influence of the educational field than other proposals and whose postulates are responses to economic tendencies for more productivity and efficiency.

The interest of this organization for studying competencies emerges after the implementation of the PISA tests at the end of the twentieth century, aimed at comparing knowledge and skills in the areas of math, reading and problem solving. It was concluded that the success of a learner in his/her life after mandatory education will depend on a higher range of competencies, and the program for the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DESECO) started for this purpose. According to OECD (2005), this program would also be in charge of the evaluations for the new proposal of competencies at the beginning of this century.

The DESECO formulates three key competencies, which are named as such because they are considered valid for any context and their

demands, and its initial scope are the OECD founding member countries; in this matter it requests the help of UNESCO to be able to define the theoretical framework and work in a proposal suitable to be applied to the larger number of contexts. Finally, the OECD (2005) postulates that the project has identified fundamental ideals that are considered as a common aspiration of the variety of realities.

Pérez (2009) presents the following concept of competence according to the DESECO:

> Capability to respond to complex demands and carry out diverse tasks appropriately. It requires a combination of practical skills, knowledge, motivation, values, attitudes, emotions and other social and behavioral components that move jointly to achieve an effective action (p. 75).

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This proposal is a functional approach which is wider than mere knowledge and skills, it is made clear that competencies are built according to demands and tasks that due to their complexity and particularities will require strategies, routines, emotions and attitudes. For Rychen and Salganik (2000), OECD considers that the acquisition of competencies is a continuous and permanent learning process.

Critics by Sacristán and Álvarez

Sacristán and Álvarez (2009) point out the following observations to this proposal of the DESECO:

- The derivation of this approach to the application of PISA tests.
- Evaluation results of PISA tests are assessed as an aim.
- Depersonalization of the teacher and his/her duties.
- Unidirectionality of speech, it embraces everything and it appears as a response to current needs.
- Declared intentions of fulfilling the needs of the market, increasing productivity and competitiveness, is the primary goal of education.
- Bureaucratization of teaching work, without room for autonomy and creativity in his/her work in classrooms, acritical adoption of standards.
- Little or null intervention of the teacher in deciding about the set of competencies, they have been determined beforehand.
- The administrative work becomes relevant and important since it is the means for managing and controlling evidences, there

is the idea that a greater administrative control will result in a greater education quality.

Despite the link and joint work of OECD and UNESCO, Sacristán (2009) states that the latter languishes and looses spaces for participation in front of the former, and this leads to a change in the educational speech and its practices, where the OECD and the World Bank design an approach according to their interests and vision in pursue to universalize its application.

Observations to the approach by competencies

This study endorses the critics made by Sacristán and Álvarez (2009), making emphasis on the last bullet, which leads to a change in the identity of the teaching work and education in general, because it focuses on handling evidences and evaluation control, where, if everything is right within the parameters of administrative control, it is not necessary to know what happens in the classrooms, the opinions of teachers nor students, evidences are the whole, but if these do not present what is expected, it is not the model what fails, it is the teacher in the classrooms. This rather envisions ingenuity and acriticity, any intended change should be in the daily work of the teacher, in his/her human quality and vocation, it is necessary to exert a large pressure on them to align them in the compromise of handling and managing evidences and documents.

A question may be posed to ask if there is really a direct relationship between the situation described and the approach by competencies, may such simple concept, if the reductionism made in this paper is accepted, result in what has been described before?; there is possibly no unique causal relationship but other reasons may contribute to such situation, besides the adoption of the external models proposed by the OECD and the World Bank; it would also be also possible to cite what the tradition of Critical Theory calls instrumental reason, a rationality that rather derives in irrationality when papers and processes are placed over individual themselves. Lipman (2002) states that: "Anything that help us to discover the meaning of life is educational, and schools are educational only as they facilitate such discovery" (p. 55). Does the approach by competencies or further on, current education as it has been described previously, contribute to this? There isn't an over dimension of market competitiveness, and is this really the most important aim of education?, they can say that it is 'not' one more aspect that should be covered, but it

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is ultimately present in the initial intentions and finally, the meaning of life cannot be determined not measured by bureaucracy, any attempt to do it is out of place, and thus an administrative and control model such as the approach by competencies cannot promise it.

For instrumental rationality as expression of the politic-economic system of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this point is manifested in a special way in organizational units where, according to Habermas (1987), "the individual is atrophied converting him/her in a mere cell of functional reactions" (p. 451), and accomplishing objectives becomes the most important issue. Now, could these organizational units, that Max Weber cited by Habermas (1987) defines as organic components of the socioeconomic system, be extended and identified in the educational environment?, apparently yes, the education as organizational unit would respond as another component of the economic system. Despite this, the declarations of the different international organizations and national curricula seem distant from this. Horkheimer cited by Habermas (1987) mentions that "in the process of rationalization, understood as bureaucratization, the ethically founded reasons of the members are blurred, making also superfluous the participation of individuals with a practical and moral rationality" (p. 449); in it, bureaucratization is a sign of this participation in the socioeconomic system in which educational systems are imbued.

Development of competencies

For McClelland, the formulation of competencies is based on the scientific method; on the other hand, the DESECO presents an interdisciplinary approach considering the following disciplines: philosophy, anthropology, psychology, economy, sociology; it curiously does not mention educational sciences. Returning to McClelland (1973), the development of competencies consists in an investigation of those attitudes, actions or procedures performed by individuals that are considered fundamental for the success in particular situations or companies, for example, to know what a manager does to consider that he/she and his/her company are successful, the actions and attitudes of a population of professionals are analyzed and compared, and the conclusions at the end of this process will be the competencies. McClelland carries out a qualitative work with statistical resources, establishing those behaviors and skills that contribute to the successful completion of an activity, is a management of probabilities, the larger the universe investigated, larger will be such probabili-

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ties. It should be also considered that there will always be a contingency range and causal relationships for the success of a worker or company, such as the dependence on the decline of another, political favors or cultural capital, etc.

Sacristán (2009) establishes a difference between the knowledge of how something arises and the knowledge of how it is produced; in the field of competencies, it is necessary a lot of research and experimentation to overcome this observation, and despite this, the social field is different from the natural field, and pretending to objectify individuals will not completely reduce the uncertainty to know what is the set of steps that will shape competent individuals. Despite this, there are statements for developing competencies through thinking and theorization, without starting from experience.

There should be pointed out that the approach by competencies is not absolute, it offers possibilities, and thus debate and discussion should not be closed. Competencies should be exercised as an element within an approach, they should not be the goal and much less the approach.

Rychen and Salganik (2000) present the competencies developed by the OECD that have been formulated with a pretension of generality, known as key competencies:

- Act in an autonomous and reflexive manner.
- Use tools interactively.
- Take part of heterogeneous groups and be functional in them (p.11).

These *key competencies* have been formulated in an interdisciplinary nature, as a must be, and thus there is no follow-up or initial study in the practice as indicated by McClelland et al. (2000), who point out that Jack Goody, anthropologist invited to the conceptual development of the proposal, considers that there are pretensions of generality that entail homogenizing effects in the diversity of contexts.

Analyzing the triad of competencies from their formulation until now, it is interpreted the predominance of certain technical and instrumental rationality. In its interdisciplinary development, the economic point of view has been weighted more than the others, and thus acting in an autonomous and reflexive manner as has been proposed through subcompetencies, where creativity and critical-analytical thinking highlight, has been rather in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in production increase, better machines have been developed to reduce costs, technology is a new need, strategies have been formulated for maintaining the attention of individuals in the consumption of digital services, which has

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resulted in a polarization and post-truth. Citing Hannah Arendt (1993) "Irreflexive creatures at the mercy of the technique regardless of how deadly they may be" (p. 16).

Torres (2021) points out that the OECD used PISA texts in 2018 to evaluate the capability-competencies of students to detect biased texts; 47 % of the average students of the OECD countries were capable of distinguishing between facts and opinions in digital media. One of the conclusions of the report states that there is a relationship between the countries with high percentages of this indicator, and the training in institutes about the use of digital media and the access to these technologies; there are also exceptions such as the case of Spain, where about 90 % of students claim to have connectivity and, however, the low percentage of students that may identify biased information is 45 %; Latin American countries such as Chile and Colombia are also below 50 %.

As a conclusion, it is stated that the OECD paradoxically evaluates what has possibly contributed to train. The ideal of success of workers and companies that seek to be competent contributes to create conditions for more traffic in networks; according to Žižek (2019) "The last corner of the globe has been conquered in technical terms and put at the service of its exploitation in economic terms" (p. 54). In this dynamic, no spaces are created to act in an autonomous-critical manner and come to a stop to question if the results of the productive expansion contribute or not to the welfare of the other and of nature.

The educational quality and the approach by competences

Highlighting the critics to the approach by competences, it is necessary to address the concept of educational quality and know the relationship between them. For López et al. (2018), educational quality as a category has a polysemic and non-neutral connotation, and thus, this study has considered the concept proposal of Harvey and Green (1993), who provide a general framework about how to understand educational quality in the following points:

- Quality understood as exceptionality, which refers to something distinctive and special.
- Quality as perfection or coherence, which consists of achieving the product perfection that is linked to the culture of quality, where it is not necessary to verify the final result because res-

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ponsibility is transversal to the members and to each stage of the process.

- Quality understood as an adaptation to a purpose, it responds to fulfilling expectations of a particular interest group.
- Quality as quality-price relationship, the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency are presented, the former consists in achieving the proposed goals and the latter in doing it with the lowest cost of resources; this notion has a direct relationship with accountability, is an investment that demands results.
- Quality as transformation, privileging qualitative changes over quantitative ones, the primary issue is that students develop their capabilities; here quality is not a service but a transformation of the participants.

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These points contribute to enable orienting the analysis of different proposals, statements of different countries, organizations, ministers and institutions, providing a resource to interpret the practice of the aforementioned and unveil the notion of quality they expose.

Quality as adaptation to a purpose may be found in the curricular proposals of different countries, where the most emerging needs that will be worked on are established according to each context, and in general competitiveness in the international market is not ignored. In this construction, determination of aims, the quality-price relationship is deployed and accountability constitutes an important moment of the process.

In this aspect, the adaptation of ISO standards plays an important role in the field of educational quality. These standards seek to evaluate each aspect of the organization, the results and its agents; Tobón (2015) indicates a variant for the educational environment, the EFQM (*European Foundation for Quality Management*) model, which applied to education presents the following essential criteria: "leadership, strategic planning, management of human talent, academic processes, results in the students, results in the human talent, results in the society, general performance" (p. 76). A position close to achievement of aims, where it is necessary to implement general standards to establish a measurement, where the criteria are focused on self-evaluation of organizations, and according to Tobón (2015), the ISO 9000 standards are the ones that provide external warranty before the state, the community and others about the quality of the educational model.

In this quality framework, educational curricula may determine, adapt or adopt an approach by competencies or another, and account-

ability will revolve around them, having now: skills, indicators, evaluation criteria and standards, which is the common jargon of these tendencies; for example, the case of Ecuador whose curricular reform in 2016 expresses the objectives in terms of capabilities (MINEDUC, 2019, p. 446), and the proposed aims are justice, solidarity and innovation, aspects similar to what is proposed by the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration. Achieving these aims is guided by skills, accountability and evaluation, and the presence of indicators as criteria for evaluation is highlighted.

Going back to international organizations, one of the main aims to which, according to OECD (2005), competencies are directed is in "improving and enhancing commercial relationships and sustainable development, where it is sought the development of abilities to face challenges from the present and the future in constant change and uncertainty" (p. 3), without relegating its social and personal attention. The member countries seek to maintain their competitiveness, others intend to reach their economic development, countries that postulate their admission to the organization and that have assumed an approach by competencies, whose most important evaluation are the PISA international tests. Better results in the PISA tests are interpreted as equivalent to educational quality (in the DESECO speech), and therefore a greater guarantee for economic development, which is a rather reprehensible issue.

The evaluation in the approach by competencies

The evaluation issue is fundamental; McClelland (1973) makes clear that it is necessary to assess the process when the competency is carried out, not only observing the results, because this involves working with abilities, skills and attitudes, in this aspect the summative evaluation only provides an incomplete information that does not enable to know if the competency has been developed correctly.

An approach to this evaluation notion is found in Miller cited by Oseda et al. (2017), who present a four-stage evaluation pyramid, the first two: know and know how, focused on the cognitive part having the exam as evaluation instrument; the last two correspond to demonstrate and make, focused on the behavior whose evaluation instruments, as proposed by Oseda et al. (2017), are: the rubric and the attitude scale. It should be noted that this author considers this evaluation as authentic because it enables linking the classrooms with real and working life (p.238)

Despite what has been pointed out, contradictions may emerge such as the cases in which an approach by competences is adopted with a content-focused teaching, where knowledge is evaluated with the exam or the questionnaire as the primary instrument; the implementation of an approach relatively new to a system whose practices are rooted in a traditional education, which is a great mistake of educational systems.

A bureaucratic and homogenizing system defines in advance the approach without analysis, revision nor consultation of the participants, educational quality is measured under arguments of authority and without criticality, leaving no space for uncertainty, it is a blind faith on a collection of papers and regulations; at the end, quantitative cold data is still used to indicate whether there is or not educational success.

At this point, it is important a reflection around the evaluation issue, citing Álvarez (2009), the evaluation is the mean not the aim that enables knowing if the student is learning or developing a competency, ability or content with the objective of being able to correct and specially conduct the learner. The evaluation should have a formative connotation centered on the process or accompaniment, for Álvarez (2009) "it is about transforming the cult to the exam (…) as a control resource to be a training exercise" (p. 233).

The approach by competencies related to the quality as a purpose is oriented to results and control of evidences, its maximum expression is the exam that measures a final result, and to which the different international tests finally drift, similar to how a company or factory evaluates the ultimate quality of their products, despite that in this specific case human beings are being assessed, a group of learners, as well as the subjects behind each educational model. If a true evaluation framework is carried out, in which educational players become aware of their learning, it would not be completely necessary a final international assessment, because the process would feedback and correct itself in pursuit of achieving a particular quality, ability or objective; comparisons between countries and models would not be necessary.

To know the limitations of this approach it is required a critical analysis, which results complicated when curricula are formulated under the influence of international organizations, many countries adopt the approach that they implement without criticality; paraphrasing Aimé Césaire (2006), the DESECO or the OECD, as the western thinking, are in the podium of the reason to determine the educational proceeding, its work is to give 'light' to peripheries, ignoring and failing to observe their needs and culture; but perhaps the root of the problems are the same subjects aligned in their dependence and political sovereignty.

Oversizing of the scope of competencies

Teaching work in classrooms requires creativity and intuition which, in front of the follow-up and the set of steps of the approach by competencies, becomes obfuscated when following a script, and he/she should do it because evidences are necessary as a proof of their work. It is necessary to believe that the cumulus of evidences demonstrates the domain of the competence, but is it possible to be sure that it will be transferred in reality? and is it really suitable to be applied in other contexts?, only the probabilities are left. What should be emphasized is that the success of a student in his/her social, economic and working life not only depends of the educational field but also of other instances, leaving this load only to education and with a single approach just ignores the inequalities and gaps in the social field.

This approach by competencies shares the logic of the quality model in connection with accountability, control of evidences and bureaucratic load; it is convenient to remark its relationship with the evaluation as purpose. At this point the results should be the guarantee for achieving success, and they will enable qualifying, classifying and in the worst case segregating; it is about revealing what has been bad from the comparison with other educational models or approaches, which in general correspond to different contexts. Such an evaluation rather causes discomfort, and thus it is necessary to rescue the notion of formative transversal evaluation, which for Álvarez (2009) "should involve all educational players, not only ministers and teachers, but also students to promote their involvement in learning, with the logical consequence of the implementation of self-evaluation" (p. 237), co-evaluation and evaluation of others beyond the summative assessment.

In this relationship between the know and the know how of the approach by competences, which according to this paper has its limitations and difficulties, what is criticized at the end is the oversizing of its scope. In this case it is proposed a perspective for the work in classrooms with a notion of quality for transformation, according to Harvey and Green, which consists in working on the conditions that are behind the competencies and the construction of knowledge, such as cognitive or executive functions or thinking skills, which are derived from the Theory of structural cognitive modifiability by Feuerstein (2012); these are common for all activities, skills or competencies carried out by subjects in any aspect of their life; it is necessary to go to the foundations of thinking to work on it and strengthen it.

The purpose of this position is to carry out an internal change in the cognitive structure of students, which has a larger resistance to impacts of the medium than other short-term changes. For de Maturana (2010) "This change alters the course of cognitive development of the individual, in his/her abilities, capabilities, competencies; above all, it alters the plasticity or modifiability of the subject that favors further learnings of the student" (p. 45). Another point to highlight in de Maturana (2010) is the support to educational inclusion of students whether they are associated or not to disabilities, issue that is not found or is not addressed by the literature about the approach by competences; for Feuerstein (2012) the gaps of students with severe disabilities may be dealt with and significant alterations may be achieved in their cognitive function, and similarly for de Maturana (2010) "in those students whose distal determinants such as the sociocultural context, the family environment, health, nutrition, etc., are an obstacle for learning" (pp. 48-49)

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This proposal is not new and has been applied in various contexts, one of the most significant may be the intervention by Valera et al. (2006), in the public network of the state of Bahía in Brazil. Finally, it is worth mentioning that this position is centered in the subjects, in the students for a quality model as transformation, beyond the market claims, achieving high grades or scores in international or local tests that derive in a bureaucratization, as mentioned by Álvarez (2009), transcending an exam-oriented teaching.

Discussion

Two positions about the approach by competencies are found in the scientific literature, one in favor of its application in the working environment and the other that questions it remarking a latent utilitarianism, position endorsed by this paper under the postulates of the Critical Theory in the thinking of Horkheimer.

Horkheimer (2002) distinguishes a subjective and instrumental rationality from an objective rationality. The former does not seek to know the specific character of processes nor the abstract functioning of thinking, it focuses its attention on means and aims without stopping to question if such objectives are reasonable. For this rationality "the idea of an objective capable of being rational by itself without referring to any type of advantage or subjective gain is (…) deeply alien" (p. 9). In contrast, objective rationality seeks to explore if the objectives are desirable by themselves, holding confidence on reason and its adaptation to

human behavior, reflecting about its acts and convictions, without abandoning the search for the truth. Horkheimer (2002) states that: "Socrates was certain that reason, understood as universal comprehension, should determine the convictions and regulate the relationships between humans and between humans and nature" (p. 13). When reason is subjectivized or relativized losing its universality, it would experience a series of changes giving rise to the pragmatic thinking that identifies the truth with the results, relativizing this category.

Horkheimer criticizes what he calls instrumental reason, the pragmatism impregnated in the thinking and social field, that has been possible to identify in this study in the approach by competences. Proposals in support of educational competencies for the working environment are discussed below, considering the following sample of works:

Guzmán et al. (2019) explicitly mentions the acquisition of competencies for the demand of the labor market, where the critical thinking serves as employability mechanism (p. 24). In reference to educational quality, it is stated the direct relationship that it has with satisfaction in the business environment, with collaborative work, problem solving and critical and creative thinking being a mean to achieve it, showing the success of this approach through the perceptions of students. Oseda et al. (2017) present a similar approach, but focusing on the pedagogical aspect, on methodological proposals to achieve a group of competencies directed to employability, these are: project-based learning, collaborative work and use of ICTs, highlighting values such as solidarity, empathy, etc. What may be criticized to Oseda et al. (2017) is not specifying the competencies developed, and to Guzmán et al. (2019) the limitation of a qualitative approach prior to employability to state that "true students solve everyday problems, satisfying the requirements of organizations" (p. 36). In the line of Oseda there are Lozano et al. (2017) in the study of pedagogical approaches; they use a hermeneutic methodology to establish the membership of three pedagogical approaches with twelve competencies in an education for sustainable development.

Beyond the observations made, it should be remarked that the pedagogical models, the quality and the education presented by these studies are means for employability, the education is not an aim in itself, it is valued by its results, it is subjected to an instrumental rationality, ontologically degenerating values such as solidarity and empathy, which should be valuable by themselves, and are rather considered a mean, a resource for employability, as it happens with critical and creative thinking which

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are considered as resources for success at work; the latter conditions the criterion for selecting methodologies and pedagogical approaches.

In this pragmatic field, according to a subjective rationality of means and aims, it should not be questioned where the education for the labor market drifts to, or if there may be another path or option, this is not its logic, the subjectivity of self-conservation does not look beyond its instrumental character. Horkheimer (2002) states that "when thinking becomes instrument, one can quit thinking" (p. 19); only the highest competencies for competitiveness in a capitalist model are expected for this field of means and aims, where the individual weighs more than the collective, efficiency is sought, the highest production with the smallest cost of resources; they are means for the fetish of money and now for the success as well. For Horkheimer (2002) "when aims are not determined anymore in the light of reason, it is impossible to claim that an economic or political system, no matter how cruel or despotic it is, is less rational than other" (p. 25).

At this point it should be rescued the vision of the New School movement, where Fullat cited by Moreno (2012) states that: "School is life and it does not prepare for life. Cooperation is more important than the competency; one learns solving problems and not through the transmission of knowledge" (p. 256). It is a school or an education whose vision of quality does not respond to a mere achievement of aims without an opening to criticism, but that it problematizes its own aim in pursuit of rationality rescuing solidarity, knowledge, the collective as valuable by itself, seeking the transformation of learners.

Another aspect to highlight is the epistemological status played by knowledge in an approach by competencies, here the discussion is centered on Higher Education where for Manríquez cited by Oseda et al. (2017) "there is a displacement from the center of gravity of university education, historically responsible for training professionals for the labor market" (p. 245); similarly, for Kreimer (2000) "the merit in strict reference to the knowledge sphere, appears as a possibility to access to working places and to political positions from the creation of universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries" (pp. 28-29). In this narrow relationship between university and employability, for Bicocca (2017) the knowledge intends to be useful, effective and operational. The know how of competencies is a mean for success at work, that will require a selective body of knowledge that will in turn be means for the know how, as Horkheimer (2002) would say, is the victory of the mean over the aim, the knowledge loses value in itself, its character becomes being an instrument.

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The effect of this pragmatism-utilitarianism acquires strength in an industrial society, where for Horkheimer "all products of human activity transform into merchandise (…). The productive work, whether manual or intellectual, has become honorable, turning into the only accepted way to spend life" (p. 30). This characterization is present in the societies of the twenty-first century intoxicated by an instrumental rationality, which justifies the need of an approach by competencies for employability, issue that became clear in the debate about European higher education at the end of the twentieth century.

For Guerrero and Clavero (2004) "the development of competencies aimed at individual personal success is the tool or guarantee of organizational success, which is the core or system, the subject of the globalization era" (p. 31). This position conceives the person as the mean for organization success, is the human capital that has to be educated and trained for self-demand and to make necessary a training by competencies. Arendt (1993) states that: "while the need would make work something indispensable to maintain life, excellence was the last thing to expect from it" (p. 58).

Barnett (2001) points out that a society that seeks regeneration of capital does not require knowledge per se, but as it can take advantage of it, an immediate pragmatic need where the knowledge that does not contribute to such purpose are easily discarded. From this logic there is no need to stop to think whether educating for economic and labor competitiveness is the main path to follow.

In this characterization of knowledge in an approach by competencies in relation to the quality as purpose, it should be highlighted its temporary nature, for Gimeno cited by Bicocca (2017), "instrumental knowledge is knowledge of high technical utility and of high temporary expiration, since they respond to occupational standards that are not absolute, and thus the competencies that are necessary today will not be necessary in few years" (p. 275). This results in abandoning an ideal of a valid or universal knowledge, there is no room to think on this but in the continuous update determined by the labor market, as it happens in the description of competencies by OECD and with the pedagogical approaches in the educational field.

The approach by competencies has been justified in this university-labor market identification, and a position that may transcend this posture is rescuing a university unrelated to instrumentalization, subjectivation and reproduction of human capital, where knowledge is not conditioned by market needs, Acosta and Miramontes (2013) state that:

The university in its own historic definition should be a space for debate and research about nature and inquiry of human condition and the scopes of culture, as well as the necessary preventions about political and technical-productive activity in the civilizing processes, the university must preserve and promote the production of knowledge, regardless if it has a technical applicability (p. 3318).

This position that separates knowledge from instrumentalization consists in assuming what Horkheimer (2002) called objective rationality, "whose essence reflects the structure inherent of reality" (p. 14), it does not ignore subjective rationality but as "part of a broader rationality, where thought may deduct criteria applicable to all things and living creatures, and where ethical and political notions are independent of subjective interests" (p. 14). At this point, paraphrasing Horkheimer (2002) a population suffering from hunger, a child in danger, the inequality, the injustice, the bureaucratization and also the environmental degradation speak their own language which is not its justification in pursuit of market productivity.

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Conclusions

The approach by competencies has an instrumental foundation, its concept, the know how or successfully solving a particular situation or problem, may be adapted to any perspective or intentions. At the end, it is desired to postulate that the emergence of such posture is a response to the labor and market system of the present times, where social institutions, with education one of them, have been bureaucratized, whose practices are directed to the success of a higher productivity, serving as a tool or mean for this objective. This position is justified from a historical review by McClelland in his study of competencies for labor efficiency, from which programs with this spirit were derived for both the business and education sectors. Afterwards, there is the presence of international organizations, specifically the OECD, whose proposals of competencies as well as its political capital have influenced quality models of countries that take part of its evaluations. In this case, the vision of quality corresponds to the purpose where it highlights accountability for sustainable development.

Then, competencies and quality emerge from this reality, and critics arise here due to their tendency to market and competitiveness, and above all for intending to be universal; beyond that, the accountability of this relationship responds to an evaluation model of summative nature, the

final evaluation will determine whether success or quality are close or not, qualifying and adjectivizing students, teachers and educational models.

The instrumental rationality of this market and employability dynamics considers knowledge and education as a mean and not as an aim in itself, is a training for the labor market, which determines the pedagogical approaches and tendencies.

Thus, regarding the question about a relationship between competencies and quality beyond economic interests, a posture of the fundamental notion of competency is endorsed, which due to its malleability it may adapt to a quality model as transformation of subjects, where the market and the working environment are not the essential things, only another aspect for training the learner, where it should be considered if the use of competencies should be an approach in itself in this quality model, or rather a resource that responds to this tendency, which may be fed from other proposals such as the structural cognitive modifiability, development of thought and epistemological principles that consider knowledge as a value in itself.

Finally, the dynamics of the evaluative matter should change, assuming the posture of Álvarez (2009), the evaluation should be present at each instant of the educational process without becoming an administrative or bureaucratic control, with the criterion of improving learnings, cognitive development, skills, and not waiting for a quantitative summative assessment that express about the student what the teachers knows beforehand. This involves and requires a change of approach in the compromise of educational players so that it transcends the proposal of quality as transformation.

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