RESEARCH ARTICLE

HIGHER EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Oswaldo Mendez Ramirez*

Department of Political and Social Sciences. Member of the National Research System (Level-1).
Autonomous University of Coahuila, Mexico

A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
	This document aims to present how university students from four countries (Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Spain) define Higher Education. The research results are derived from a qualitative / interpretative study. natural semantic networks were used to obtained the data. The sample consisted of 350 students (n = 350). 70 students per country (Chile, Argentina and Mexico) and 140 for Spain. Field work was carried out in Chile in April 2012 (U of Chile), Mexico in May 2014 (UADEC), Argentina in October 2014 (U Nacional de Córdoba) and Spain in April 2015 (U of Salamanca). Research results show that for college students in these four countries, higher education: is made up of the institution, its actors and instruments (university, teachers, students, books,exams) is constituted by its relationship between conditions / benefits (quality, training, employment) and is supported by the elements that give it meaning (knowledge, learning, study).

INTRODUCTION

The cases of four universities contextualized in different nations, with different regimes of government, history and totally diverse cultural forms. Higher education is understood not as an adjectival entity or constructed from a unilineal form by the designers of educational policies. This text presents the definition of the protagonists of higher education. The voice of those who at different times are protagonists of structured processes according to policies that do not always match with social needs. The voice of the subjects who in their school career intends to receive a product that, at the end of this trajectory, allows them to compete in the labor market.

This manuscript explores which are the aspects that are considered as important in higher educational policy according to the student's perspectives. In this sense, the purpose of this manuscript is to:

1. Develop semantic networks around the concept of higher education.
2. Identify specific higher education concepts among students of four universities.

Students' definition of higher education, based on specific characteristics of each context, will allow a better understanding of the dialectical relationship between the need / problem that each higher education institution experiences and

to analyze the epistemic relationship between the subjects of education and the institutions, in the understanding that the ways of perceiving education on the part of each subject, is constructed of multiple definitions. This manuscript contributes to the discussion on the role of higher education, represented by the university (as an entity) in society, its constituent elements and the participating actors.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a qualitative, descriptive and interpretative research.

Research design

It's descriptive research. This approach allows to obtain information and descriptive data that derives from the words expressed (written) by the research subjects. It takes place in the context where the subjects construct their daily reality. It is interpretative, because it suggests the approach to the social practices and the perceptions of the subjects from a theoretical and conceptual explanation. This type of research allows access to the conceptual universe of subjects and to the meaning networks that students of the universities have regarding the concept of "Higher education".

Natural semantic networks, a set of concepts chosen by memory through a reconstructive process, were used. This network is not only given by associative links. The semantic network of a

*✉ Corresponding author: **Oswaldo Mendez Ramirez**
Department of Political and Social Sciences. Member of the National Research System (Level-1). Autonomous University of
Coahuila, Mexico

concept is given by the nature of the memory processes that choose the elements that integrate it. This selection is not based on the strength of the association, but on the class of properties of the elements that make up the network (Figueroa, *et al*., 1981). The sample consisted of 350 students (n = 350), 70 students per country (Chile, Argentina and Mexico) and 140 for Spain. All students were invited to participate voluntarily and with the intention of guaranteeing anonymity, the field instrument did not request the informant´s name.

Procedures

Fieldwork was carried out in Chile in April 2012 (U of Chile), Mexico in May 2014 (UADEC-Coahuila), Argentina in October 2014 (U Nacional de Córdoba) and in Spain in April 2015 (U of Salamanca). Natural semantic networks were applied to all subjects (Figueroa *et al*., 1981; Valdez Medina *et al*., 1998), requesting that, in front of the word stimulus: "Higher Education", they would express with a minimum of five and a maximum of ten words, the definition of each concept. Making the indication that to define a stimulus word, verbs, adverbs, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, could be used. Subjects were discouraged to use any grammatical particles (articles or prepositions).

In the second instance, they were asked to rank each and every one of the words that were given as definers, assigning number (1) that is considered the most important, to the word closest related to the word stimulus; number (2) to the following; (3) to the next, and so on, until he/she had finished to rank each and every one of the words given as definers, assigning the number ten to the word that is further from the concept. Subjects had five minutes to carry out the definition exercise and two minutes to do the hierarchy.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the natural semantic networks the fundamental indicators described by Figueroa (1981); Moreno (1999); Valdez Medina *et al*. (2004); Cabalín, *et al*. (2010) were considered; these are:

1. J value. Indicates network size. The total of defining words used for the stimulus word. Displays the network's semantic richness.
2. M value. Indicates semantic weight. The value obtained through multiplying the frequency of occurrence and the hierarchy obtained by this concept (M= frequency x hierarchy).
3. SAM set. The group of words that get the highest values M.
4. FMG value. Indicates semantic distance. The defining words in the set SAM, in terms of percentages and semantic distance between words taking the word with more semantic weight as a 100% reference.
5. G value. Indicates semantic density. The difference between the highest and the lowest M values in the SAM set, which is divided by ten. Indicates the proximity among the ten M values that compose the SAM set, where the low G values reflect a high semantic density and the high G values reflect a low density; it is understood that there is distance between the concepts that constitute the network.

RESULTS

The descriptive analysis of the results obtained after the application of the field instruments to the students of the four universities in the same number of countries (Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Spain) is presented.

Table 1 shows the results obtained for the University of Chile (in Chile) students. SAM set results for the ten words with the highest semantic weight (M-value) are shown in Table 1. A total of 187 definitive words were obtained for the concept "Higher Education", that is, J = 187. It is a network with semantic poverty. Value G (the closeness of the first ten M values with which the SAM set is composed) is high, G = 17.7. This means that there is a low semantic density in all definitions associated with the concept of higher education. It is a very thin network.

Table 2 shows the results obtained for the students of the Autonomous University of Coahuila (Mexico). The result of the SAM set for the ten words with the highest semantic weight (M-value) are shown in Table 2. A total of 101 defining words were obtained for the concept of "higher education", that is, J = 101. It is a network with semantic poverty. The G value is notoriously very high G = 17.9. This means that there is little semantic density in all the definitions associated with the concept of higher education. It is a very thin network.

Table 3 shows the results obtained for the students of the National University of Cordoba (Argentina). The result of the SAM set for the ten words with the highest semantic weight (M-value) are shown in Table 3. A total of 205 definitive words were obtained for the concept "Higher Education", that is, J = 205. It is a network with semantic Richness (+200). G value (G= 18.3) is very high. This means that there is a low semantic density in all definitions associated with the concept of higher education. It is a very thin network.

Table 4 shows the results obtained for the students of the University of Salamanca (Spain), specifically undergrads in criminology and communication. The result of the SAM set for the ten words with the highest semantic weight (M-value) are shown in Table 4. A total of 155 defining words were obtained for the concept of "higher education", J = 155. It is a network with semantic poverty. G value is very high (G = 31.4). This means that there is a low semantic density in all definitions associated with the concept of higher education. It is a very thin network.

Table 5 shows the results obtained for the students of the University of Salamanca (Spain), particularly social work and social sciences undergraduate programs. SAM set results for the ten words with the highest semantic weight (M-value) are shown in Table 5. A total of 171 defining words were obtained for the concept of "higher education", J = 171. It is a network with semantic poverty. A high G value (G = 23.6) is notorious. This means that there is a low semantic density in all definitions associated with the concept of higher education. It is a very thin network.

DISCUSSION

According to the results for college students in these four countries, higher education: is made up of the institution, its actors and instruments (university, teachers, students, books,

exams) is constituted by its relationship between conditions / benefits (quality, training, employment) and is supported by the elements that give it meaning (knowledge, learning, study).

The concepts learning, knowledge, quality, employment; were present in the construction of the semantic networks derived from the M values obtained. Students expects to get a quality product as a final result of the educational process. It is clear that for students, higher education is represented by the university as a formal entity that is constituted of the transmission of knowledge; being learning the substantive element that must be produced and transmitted in a quality higher education. In this sense, the definition and conceptual construction (network / semantic memory) that university students have, coincides with the definition that Mexico´s National Institute for the Assessment of Education (INEE, 2003: 28) gives to the concept of educational quality; where it is considered that this "includes the level of learning achieved by students".

Definitions given by the students show that they are aware of what education should provide them. The definitions established by the official evaluating institutions (INEE 2003) are pertinent and consistent with the reality of the demand and with the need of the subject receiving the educational service. In this sense and in the words of José Joaquín Brunner, higher education is being:

An institutional apparatus for certification of professional technical knowledge of a massive nature (...); is the interaction between government, market and institution that fulfill the function of certifying (...); the bulk of the system is to certify knowledge and endow the person with human capital that will give the person a return, a status once graduated (Brunner, 2012). Bourdieu and Passeron (2009) discuss the possibility of social mobility, through human capital (obtained through learning) and certified by the institution, discussing Brunner's perspective on the cultural reproduction of Bourdieu and Passeron (2009) in Heirs (students and culture). In this text and in the words of Sidicaro (2009) the authors:

Aimed to demonstrate that school institutions acted in a predominant way, granting educational titles and recognitions to those who belonged to privileged cultural, social and economic situations, and that through their action legitimized and reinforced social inequalities of origin, which gave them the character of natural gifts of intelligence. In this way, school systems reproduced and rewarded, under the allocation of unequal intellectual capacity or interest in knowledge, what in reality were the consequences of the social asymmetries that symbolically crowned (Sidicaro, 2009: XIX).

In fact, whether it is an instrument of certification for social mobility or an instrument that reinforces inequalities, university students expect to receive more from higher education. The receiver of the service wants to obtain learning as a product derived from a quality educational offer. He/ she hopes that higher education will be and will offer much more than it is currently being and meaning for society. The findings from the analysis show that the university student expects to receive employment opportunities as a benefit derived from quality higher education. It is evident that the student wants an education based on democratic and liberal principles that breaks with all social asymmetries, as Sidicaro points out: In the imaginary representations of French society, public school institutions had long been the symbol of the assertion of republican and democratic principles, while for progressive ideas they meant the expansion of equality of possibilities and their functions contributed to overcome the social asymmetries of origin (Sidicaro, 2009: XIX). Current educational systems are not homogeneous as some European educational systems can be (Holland, for example), where the State is responsible for financial support and has more control of the quality of services offered within institutions of higher education. In this sense and in Brunner's words (2012) "One must speak of qualities within the Chilean educational system, since it is a system that has degrees of heterogeneity."

The current paradigm of educational quality has been embraced by the vast majority of education systems around the world. For some it is a goal to which we must aspire, for the critics of neoliberalism is a pedagogical fetish. Either one or the other, higher education in Latin America is adopting this paradigm at the educational policy level. Quality educational policy seeks to counteract existing inequalities in educational levels, it aims to be consolidated as a policy. The ultimate goal of an educational systems is, at the basic level, to achieve the levels of academic achievement established by the OECD at the global level, while at the higher level, it aims to provide quality higher education and make the graduate more competitive to be inserted in the labor market.

The Chilean educational system has become an instrument of class preferences, which by definition makes it a system of social exclusion. The university is the vehicle by which young Chileans are being subjected to it. For the cases of Mexico (case of the UNAM p.e.) and Argentina, higher education is free. There is no cost. In the case of the Autonomous University of Coahuila, the average annual tuition cost is $ 3,000 mxp ($ 150 USD), a relatively high cost for the lower classes, considering that the average salary of a worker is $ 70 mxp, thus if a parent wanted to send a child to college he/she would have to devote a high percentage of their income to tuition. From this perspective, the current scenario threatens university identity as an instrument of inclusion, mobility and justice. It is necessary for higher education (represented by universities), to redefine themselves as a social institution in the face of neoliberal tendencies.

Annexed. Boards table

Table 1 SAM assembly. Stimulus Word: Higher Education. U Students of Chile

		Value M	Value FMG (%)	Value G
1.	COLLEGE	232	100	0
2.	KNOWLEDGE	152	65.5	8
3.	LEARNING	138	59.4	1.4
4.	STUDY	112	48.2	2.6
5.	QUALITY	84	36.2	2.8
6.	TRAINING	84	36.2	0
7.	CAREER	79	34	0.5
8.	INEQUALITY	73	31.4	0.6
9.	FUTURE	59	25.4	1.4
10.	INDEBTEDNESS	55	23.7	0.4

Value J= 187
Value G= 17.7

Source: self-made.

Table 2 SAM set. Stimulus Word: Higher Education.
UADEC students

		Value M	Value FMG (%)	Value G
1.	TEACHERS	273	100	0
2.	UNIVERSITY	180	65.9	9.3
3.	SCHOOL	174	63.7	0.6
4.	STUDENTS	161	58.9	1.3
5.	BOOKS	158	57.8	0.3
6.	BACHELOR`S DEGREE	144	52.7	1.4
7.	WORK	106	38.8	3.8
8.	CAREER	103	37.7	0.3
9.	EXAMS	101	36.9	0.2
10.	PROFESSION	94	34.4	0.7
	Value J= 101			
	Value G= 17.9			

Source: self-made.

Table 3 SAM set. Stimulating Word: HIGHER
EDUCATION. Students UN-Córdoba

		Value M	**Value FMG (%)**	**Value G**
1.	UNIVERSITY	243	100	0
2.	STUDY	155	63.7	8.8
3.	PROFESSIONAL	144	59.2	1.1
4.	TRAINING	115	47.3	2.9
5.	BOOKS	108	44.4	0.7
6.	TEACHERS	89	36.3	1.9
7.	WORK	81	33.3	0.8
8.	KNOWLEDGE	77	31.6	0.4
9.	LEARNING	67	27.5	1.0
10.	STUDENTS	60	24.6	0.7
	Value J= 205			
	Value G= 18.3			

Source: self-made.

Table 4 SAM set. Stimulus Word: Higher Education (n =
70) USAL students / criminology and communication

		Value M	**Value FMG (%)**	**Value G**
1.	UNIVERSITY	407	100	0
2.	KNOWLEDGE	160	39.3	24.7
3.	TRAINING	138	33.9	2.2
4.	WORK/ JOB	138	33.9	0
5.	STUDY	133	32.6	0.5
6.	FUTURE	117	28.7	1.6
7.	UNIVERSITY DEGREE	112	27.5	0.5
8.	TEACHERS	102	25.0	1.0
9.	EXAM	96	23.5	0.6
10.	STUDY	93	22.6	0.3
	Value J= 155			
	Value G= 31.4			

Table 5 SAM set. Word Stimulus: Higher Education (n =
70) GROUP 4. Students USAL. Social Work and Social
Sciences

		Value M	**Value FMG (%)**	**Value G**
1.	STUDY	305	100	0
2.	UNIVERSITY	274	89.8	3.1
3.	TRAINING	171	56.0	1.3
4.	JOB	171	56.0	0
5.	EXAMS	101	33.1	7.0
6.	FUTURE	90	29.5	1.1
7.	LEARNING	84	27.5	0.6
8.	GRADE	76	24.9	0.8
9.	EFFORT	69	22.6	0.7
10.	CAREER	69	22.6	0
	Value J= 171			
	Value G= 23.6			

Source: self-made.

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