

THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF SYSTEMATIC INQUIRY (EPIS): AN ESSENTIAL STRATEGY IN THE TRAINING OF ACADEMIC INTELLECTUALS WITH CRITICAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE THINKING

Recibido: May 20, 2024

Aceptado: November 6, 2024

Article Type: Scientific and Technological Research

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Cómo citar este artículo:

López, N. E. (2024). THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF SYSTEMATIC INQUIRY (EPIS): AN ESSENTIAL STRATEGY IN THE TRAINING OF ACADEMIC INTELLECTUALS WITH CRITICAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE THINKING. *Revista PACA 17*, pp. 17-30.

Abstract: Sharing critical elaborations and perceptions regarding the work and commitment of educators (academic professionals) in the construction of critical and reflective thinking in response to the current situation of Colombian education, within a context of technological advancement and colonization (digital era, the consolidation of artificial intelligence, automation, and robotization of processes, among others), becomes the central purpose of this article. It presents a series of challenges and imperative demands for social and academic intellectuals, requiring the structuring of clear and well-argued responses directly related to equity, equality, respect, the preservation and defense of human rights, peacebuilding, and peaceful coexistence.

The body of this research article is structured into four sections. First, it outlines the theoretical and conceptual positioning (theoretical references). Then, it delves into the process of deconstructing and reconstructing educational reality. It continues with an illustrated argument on the formation process and its inclusive relationship with sub-processes related to curriculum, pedagogy, didactics,

and evaluation, as determinants of "the construction of critical identities". The article concludes by presenting a well-founded and broad possibility for change based on the development and implementation of a pedagogical approach—EPIS—grounded in "systematic inquiry", emphasizing the need to address *situated problems*, as an essential aspect of the training process in which the academic intellectual (educator) is embedded.

Keywords: formation, field, deconstruction, academic intellectual, pedagogical approach, systematic inquiry, critical thinking, EPIS.

Introduction

This article is the result of a series of investigations¹ that have shaped the fundamental structure and reference points for the research lines guiding the investigative development of the PACA Research Group (Category A in Minciencias), as well as the high-level training programs of Universidad Surcolombiana: the Master's in Education (25 cohorts), accredited with High Quality by Resolution 22119 on October 24, 2017, and the Doctorate in Education and Environmental Culture (8 cohorts), with a qualified registration under Resolution No. 016289 by the Ministry of National Education on September 1, 2020, currently awaiting an academic peer visit for High Quality Accreditation.

The dynamics of the PACA Group have enabled the construction of a Training Model whose core essence is *Research*, which supports the design, development, and academic evaluation as fundamental processes of the Pedagogical Approach of Systematic Inquiry (EPIS).

1 The Alternative Curricular Action Program -PACA- Research Group, Category A of Minciencias in its last five years has carried out the following research: 2022-2024: Strengthening the Knowledge Management System in Education for the Department of Huila, with BPIN code: 2020000100461, 2021; The Exercise of Human Rights at the Universidad Surcolombiana; 2020: The Institutional Environment as a determining factor for permanence and abandonment; 2019: Student permanence and abandonment: Cracks for the school of peace, equity, reconciliation and the exercise of human rights within the framework of the post-agreement; 2018: Construction of alternative pedagogical practices for the training of teachers for peace, equity and reconciliation, research that is taken as basic references of this article, which fundamentally aims to argue the need to understand and assume the teacher as an academic intellectual characterized by critical, alternative and transformative thinking.

This approach conceptualizes training as the creative synthesis between a *field of problems* and a *field of knowledge and expertise*, constituting the central proposal for the formation of academic intellectuals (educators). Essentially, this article presents the grammar of EPIS for scrutiny by the national and international educational community, with the aim of encouraging researchers, research groups, entities, and institutions responsible for educator training to understand that the formative task cannot be reduced to a process of information transmission, nor should educators be turned into mere operators or curriculum appendages. Instead, it lays the groundwork for advancing toward the conception of the educator or professor as an academic intellectual, a social subject who thinks, analyzes, questions, interrogates, creates, includes, and excludes knowledge and expertise from a perspective that responds to territorial needs, ensuring social belonging and academic relevance in the formative process. This is aimed at constructing a just, equitable, democratic, and alternative school.

Theoretical References

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This research article is structured to reflect on analytical categories that facilitate addressing the problem of forming critical, alternative, and transformative thinking in the current era, characterized by the hegemony of digitization and process automation, which is interpreted in various analyses as a new form of cultural colonization. It seeks to share the findings of research processes carried out by the PACA Research Group—Alternative Curricular Action Program (Category A in Minciencias)—and some research productions from the Doctorate in Education and Environmental Culture and the Master in Education at Universidad Surcolombiana. These investigations conduct a concrete and thorough analysis that strengthens the identity of the professor or educator as an *academic and social researcher*.

The article begins by defining key analytical categories that serve as references and substantive arguments to foster a process of reflection and critical analysis regarding the current reality of education professionals. These categories include:

- **IDENTITY:** Redefining and resignifying the identity or subjectivity of education professionals in Colombia as researchers of their own professional reality and context. This approach offers a viable and possible alternative for creating a dynamic school that facilitates peace and social harmony (López, N., Celeita, L. & Perdomo W., 2016, p. 18).

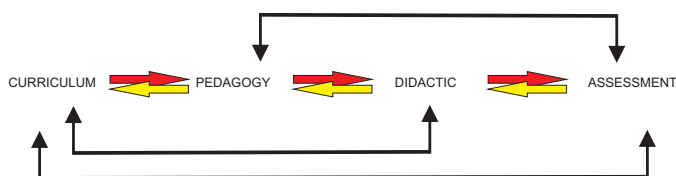
The notion of professional identity could be pointed out as "the result of inserting a professional career into a collective base. The student's professional career is a career of knowledge, a moral career and a career of situation. The collective base of this career is built by the principle of social order or the ordering of the social that is foreseen in schools and institutions of the State (Bernstein: 1997 and López, N., Celeita, L. & Perdomo W., 2016, p. 95).

- **INTEGRAL INTELLECTUAL:** It is characterized by assuming its status as an academic and researcher of social, cultural, environmental, social and political reality as references for action. *Not an operator of norms* (Institutional Regulatory Discourse: Bernstein: 1997) and, in the case of the teacher, *not an operator of contents*; on the contrary, an academic and social researcher.

- **FIELD CONCEPT:** "It is the result of power relations and struggles between agents and/or institutions that tend to preserve or transform *specific forms of power* in the economic, political and cultural spheres. The notion of field carries with it the notion of a space of positions (dominant/dominated) structured in terms of a concrete dispute and generative of specific competences and interests (Bourdieu, 1980).

- **FORMATION:** A creative symbiosis between a field of problems and a field of knowledge and expertise, which becomes *the educator's domain of action as an academic intellectual*.

PROCESSES INHERENT TO FORMATION



Symbiotic processes of the same complex problem (training) that require being approached from an investigative perspective supported by wonder, doubt, suspicion (López: 2015).

De-construction and Re-construction

It is important to begin this elaboration by specifying that de-construction fundamentally implies referring to a process of decentering, of unraveling, of decomposition, of destructuring” (López, J. 2011, p. 27) and demands as an ethical responsibility to advance in a serious and argued process of Re-construction of valid and viable alternatives to innovate in a *transformative* way the reality under analysis. It is important to note that in current reality there are various mediations and technological developments that guarantee the delivery of argued and real-time information; however, it is necessary to highlight their condition as “means”, discarding the conception of an end in themselves.

If an innovative transformation is intended, it is indisputable to recognize the need and the requirement to advance a process of deconstruction, understood as "a tool used in the construction of the basic conditions so that the training of professionals moves towards knowledge processes that weaken and overcome the instruction and transmission processes in force today" (López, 2001, p. 25). It is not an easy task, deconstructing the current educational reality is a supremely complex challenge that goes through a process of *unlearning and relearning* (Freire: 1980), and it is from this purpose that we are invited to understand the commitment to create a new school, which inexorably requires the active participation of teachers and school directors in this urgent and vital process, assumed as academic intellectuals and creators of new realities.

To reiterate that the essential epistemic reason that will guide and lead the construction of the new school is centered on the need to *intervene and de-hegemonize* the “transmission of content” as a structuring process of the pedagogical practices present in current training; this gives rise to incorporating *systematic inquiry* as the essential pedagogical mediation for the construction of a school

relevant to peace, participation, recognition of differences, reasoned criticism, and visibility.

The PACA² Research Group in the context of the purposes that guide the work of the *teacher (academic intellectual)*, from a critical perspective and within the framework of the different challenges posed by the current increasingly complex and contradictory reality, the PACA Research Group proposes the implementation of a pedagogical approach of systematic inquiry –EPIS–, a proposal immersed in the *framework of the contradictory social, academic and cultural reality*.

Methodology

The investigations developed by the PACA Research Group, which form the basis of this article, adhere to the following principles:

1. *Working WITH the community*, instead of working *ON or FOR* the community, ensuring legitimacy and validity by expanding the participation of all members of the study community, including educators, administrators, students, social leaders, and community managers.

2. *A bottom-up approach*; which, through a structural methodological change, gathers and listens to different voices within the community to construct a "polyphony" of perspectives regarding the responsibility of educators as academic intellectuals.

3. *Context TAKES PRECEDENCE over text*, this principle becomes a central reference for guaranteeing *social belonging and academic relevance*, considered basic characteristics of the processes of democratization of knowledge and know-how. This principle is basically

2 It is not the intention of the PACA Group to accept it uncritically; on the contrary, it is aware that the horizon of action is broad, diverse, plural, contextual, situated and historical, which is why it is the commitment of the PACA Research Group to participate in the various events of discussion, analysis, reflection and complementation on the validity of the proposal. It warns that all observations, suggestions, criticisms and contributions will be received as elements for the consolidation and appropriation of a new path that allows us to look with optimism to a new future for our beloved Colombia, a future in which the new school has a direct and ethically significant responsibility.

the basis for considering the teacher or professor as an academic intellectual.

Results

The EPIS collects the contributions arising from the analysis of the information obtained in the workshops-conversations held with the different focus groups. These significant findings become the foundation of the EPIS proposal that contributes to the consolidation of the work carried out in the last decade by the PACA Research Group, Category A Minciencias. In addition, it responds in a proactive way to the creation of conditions that facilitate the orientation and construction of alternative pedagogical practices consistent with the desires for peace, equity and reconciliation that seek to characterize the new school that the current context in Colombia demands.

The initiative aims to respond to specific problems and needs at different levels of education (critical reading, for example, mediated by digital advances and devices); that is, the proposed approach seeks to detect weaknesses or gaps in the field of contextualized knowledge and know-how in order to analyze them and adjust them to the social reality that the country is going through and to a context significantly impacted by the countless technological developments.

The alternative pedagogical proposal, EPIS, proposes to work from the **problems and needs present** in the educational context on a permanent basis. The EPIS is a pretext for all educational institutions to establish strategic alliances that allow the development of innovative and alternative educational projects, responding to the reality that the country is currently experiencing within the framework of the new demands of the context and reality (the digital era and its impact on education and, in this specific case, on the problem of critical reading), with the perspective of weakening student dropout and strengthening the processes of permanence and graduation.

The EPIS aims to analyze the administrative, academic, curricular, pedagogical and cultural structures of the IEs assumed to be "truly

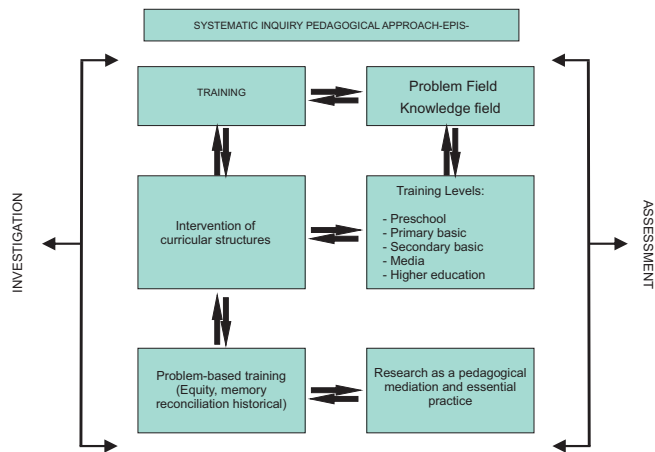
problematic" in order to subsequently evaluate and intervene in them, with the aim of achieving social belonging and academic relevance, as a basis for academic quality and excellence.

Furthermore, it poses a direct opposition to encyclopedic academic processes and suggests the construction of alternative training projects that are based on permanent inquiry processes, where the relationships between the academic community are *horizontal*, that is, where the capacities and skills of others, their approaches and their constructions of knowledge are recognized. Today, there are four characteristic aspects of EPIS:

The problems, which are suggested, should guide the formative process, immersing themselves in the reality in which the school operates and not in the contents with which it has historically worked. It is necessary to cultivate *the capacity for wonder* in the student as an indispensable element in the formative process; ***teamwork*** is fundamental because through the processes of interaction and communication between peers, the problems that are the object of study can be better understood; through collective work, different points of view can be known that enrich the teaching-learning processes.

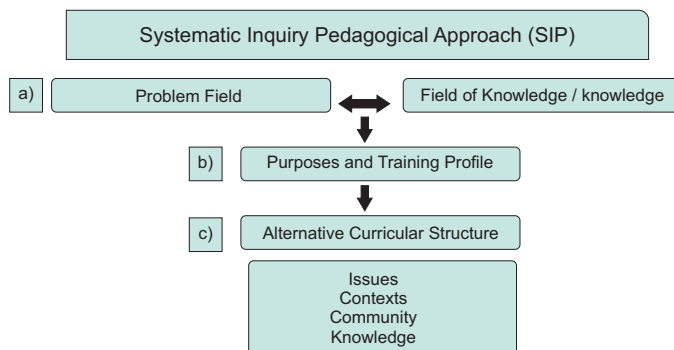
Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary processes are the basis of the approach in question because they are intended to modify obsolete and decontextualized curricular structures by enabling the appropriation of theoretical and conceptual elements in a different way.

Finally, the EPIS assumes ***evaluation (assessment)*** as the possibility of jointly achieving the objectives set for the achievement of significant learning; in this sense, the work carried out by the student will be assumed as an evaluative act and not a measurement act.



Source: Prepared by PACA Group, 2019.

As a consequence of the characteristics of the EPIS, it is necessary to carry out a structural **deconstruction and reconstruction** of the academic and research processes of the IE, in such a way that the training is structured as a result of the creative dialogue between a field of problems and a field of knowledge and know-how; that is, the training would be oriented to work directly on the problems of a concrete reality of the educational environment, reacting and giving pertinent responses that allow the consolidation of alternative pedagogical practices, in accordance with a territorial and situated approach.



Source: Prepared by PACA Group, 2020.

In accordance with the aforementioned characteristics of the EPIS, it is valid to point out that knowledge is not reduced to its assimilation, but rather it aims to be a strategy that dynamizes the student's formative process based on *research*; in other words, the approach is designed so that the student takes ownership of its structure and can build critical sense and judgment, and learn to confront and address problems integrated into a context of peace, equity and reconciliation, from the perspective of creating and consolidating a new school.

EPIS proposes working on contradictory, tense, problematic spaces, understood as organized pedagogical experiences (practices) to investigate and resolve conflicts, doubts, inconsistencies that are presented entangled in the world of life as an organizer of the curriculum; as a teaching strategy that actively involves students as those responsible for solving the inconsistency or irregularity presented.

The EPIS proposes the existence of three reciprocal, complementary and interdependent levels of implementation. These levels refer to the macro, meso and micro dimensions.

A first process in the development of the EPIS is directly related to **contextualization**. This contextualization is the result of the dialogue or interaction between the *macro dimension* of reality and its *micro dimension*. At this macro level we find, for example, the impacts or influences and determinations related to international education policies, policies that exert a marked influence on national educational policies and, in some cases, even on institutional educational policies. The idea of looking at this dimension of policies is directly related to the *problems* that underline these policies. It is repeatedly found that in an attempt to standardize or generalize realities, international organizations or agencies present countries with a series of conditions and characteristics that should guide the development of their school system.

The meso level is structured by the **objectives** and **formatives profiles** that are intended to be achieved; it is essential to construct a set of questions that refer to problems related to the challenges that arise in the construction of a new school.

The problem begins to become more complex when the *formative profiles* that are the identifying characteristics of every professional, the result of an uncritical copy or reproduction and not of a research process supported by systematic inquiry, ask about the previous studies that have been developed to determine what is the *formative profile* of a doctor, an engineer or a graduate, at the levels of initial, basic and secondary education in a context of peace, equity and reconciliation.

At the meso level, the EPIS aims to analyse the problems underlying the training processes and how these problems are reproduced in the processes of defining the *training profile*.

As a result of the analysis of the macro and meso phases, a third, very specific and precise phase emerges, which refers to the *micro level*, alluding to problems related to the performance of teachers in the classroom, with the pedagogical mediations used, with the specific academic, research and social projection developments directly involved with the scope of the previously defined purpose and training profile. The need arises to achieve coherence between the *pedagogical practices* developed and the demands of a new context characterized by the intention of contributing to peace, equity and social reconciliation of Colombians.

The EPIS approach raises some criteria that are very integrated with the principles that support it:

1. If the curricular process is a *research process*, it must be developed as such.
2. The second criterion is the *permanent elaboration by successive and collective* approximation; it is necessary to link the various audiences (managers, teachers, students, graduates, parents, others) to the formative process in the construction of these curricula and in the construction of this model.
3. The third criterion relates to *research* as the essence of the EPIS.
4. It has been insisted throughout this work that **problems** become the central axes of alternative formative processes in the face of a new social context.

5. In addition to research, evaluation must be read as an *assessment*. The concept that evaluation ends in a grade or a quantitative result integrated into a scale must be overcome.

6. *Group work* is a fundamental condition for the design, development and evaluation of the EPIS; The groups must be made up of the audiences involved in the formative processes (managers, teachers, students, graduates, parents, others).

7. Curricular committees as an essential organizational strategy in the implementation of the EPIS.

8. Finally, one of the criteria for implementing this process has to do with *feedback*, understood as the bidirectional work of the process; the idea is to break with that hegemonic and linear view that considers the curricular process to be the development of a series of steps; on the contrary, seen from the systemic conception, the results of the developed cycles become input for the gestation and beginning of a new cycle. According to Morin (2011), from the complex perspective the whole lives in the parts and the parts live in the whole.

Conclusions

It is of vital importance to affirm that the different curricular structures, pedagogical actions, didactic developments and evaluative processes are *essentially investigative developments mediated by structures of power and control*, which is why trying to advance in analysis and reflections on the commitment of the different social subjects (academic intellectuals) in the face of the existing reality, must be understood as essentially political and ideological questions, with which the pragmatic and instrumental intention that seeks to affirm a possible "value neutrality" becomes a strategy to consolidate the status quo and, in this way, hinder change and transformative innovation.

The above supports the assertion that the role of the teacher, assumed as an academic and social intellectual, is supported by an attitude of critical understanding of his role as a determining factor of change in the educational institution, which autonomously determines its institutional work in the perspective of redefining and rethinking

the school at the service of a dignified education, committed to peace, equity, respect, defense and preservation of human rights.

It is worth noting that the predominance of the pedagogical model based on transmission, in addition to minimizing the critical and creative attitude, goes against the generation of critical, innovative and transformative attitudes; in this sense, it is worth highlighting that "Information is becoming a new way of being and even a new form of domination. In collusion with neoliberalism, an information regime is being implemented that does not act by repressing but by seducing. This regime assumes an intelligent and refined form.

It does not act on the basis of commands and prohibitions. It does not force us to remain silent. Instead, this intelligent power constantly encourages us to communicate our opinions, needs and preferences, to tell, post and share our lives, and to like them. Here freedom is not repressed, but fully exploited. It falls under control and management. Intelligent and refined power is very effective, because it does not need to be openly displayed. It hides behind an appearance of freedom and communication. While we post, share and hit the "like" button, we are submitting to the regime of control. Today we are stunned by so much information intoxication" (Byung-Chul Han, 2023).

However, supporting actions around the process of training teachers as academic intellectuals contributes to the creation and elaboration of viable, possible, realistic and challenging alternatives, to jointly advance towards the construction of the school as a scenario of innovative transformation that contributes to the achievement of a "cognitive justice as an unequivocal guarantee of social justice" (De Sousa Santos).

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