

# A Critical Reading of the “Educational” Neo-language of Competencies The Case of Colombia

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Résumé de l'article

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## *A Critical Reading of the “Educational” Neo-language of Competencies The Case of Colombia*

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to understand, from a critical point of view, the condition of semantic, discursive, and rhetorical displacement that operates in the Colombian educational system, where the category of education has been displaced by the concept of competence. The following question guides the investigation: What are the deep meanings, from semiotic considerations and discourse analysis, that underlies the rationality of competencies as a category inserted in the discourse of the Ministry of National Education of Colombia (MEN)? The research confirms that since 2004, under the neoliberal government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, the Colombian educational system has been guided by an instrumental and economistic conception of education, whose logic is characterized by the notions of "efficiency", "competence", "results" and "success" as categories that indicate the educational horizon promoted by the Colombian State. We argue that the pragmatic result is an institutional isomorphism that tends to nullify real social participation and creates conflict, ignoring the cultural and regional diversity of the country.*



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The evolutionary trend toward the production of life forms with an increasing interpretative capacity or semiotic freedom implies that the production of meaning has become an essential survival parameter in later stages of evolution (Hoffmeyer, Jesper 2010. *A biosemiotic approach to the question of the meaning*).

## Introduction

For at least 20 years in different parts of the world, especially in all Western countries, the educational dynamics in public and private school systems have been organizing their functions and tasks based on the unifying concept of competencies, which acts as a dominant and exponential semantic concept and category in the language of education (Charbonnier, 2015, 2013; De Rey, A. & Sánchez-Parga, 2011; Skubi-Ermenc & Vujisic-Živkovic, 2015; Masschelein, 2001; Villarroel, & Bruna, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The word belongs to an educational model called competency-based education (CBE). The approach has been proposed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD since 1997 with the testing of the Program for International Student Assessment - PISA (OECD, 2000; 2010) (see Hoest, 2016). The first book on competency-based education was published in the late 1960s by Malcolm Knowles, considered the father of adult education. Knowles' book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy* (1970), can be considered the first text on CBE and helped popularize the concept of education focused on the demonstration of specific skills and knowledge, as opposed to traditional approaches focused on time-based degrees that resulted in high desertion among adults. The dominant role of the competence theme has attracted academic attention; however, it cannot be concluded that the competence approach to education has the unanimous acceptance of teachers after so many years, nor does it have sufficient scientific evidence to ensure its strength and educational potential (López, León and Pérez, 2018).

Colombia is in South America and is a politically centralized country, with a population of 51.6 million and one of the longest unresolved political armed conflicts in the world. The Ministry of Education (MEN) is responsible for education policy. According to Colombian law and the Constitution, education is considered a citizen's right and a government priority. The Ministry is the state institution responsible for formulating and monitoring the policies and objectives for the development of the education sector in one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world.

In Colombia, the education system is divided into two sectors: public or official education and private education. Both are regulated by the Ministry. According to the National Statistics Office (DANE, 2022), the total number of students enrolled in the official sector in 2022 was 7,874,9271 and 1,855,041 in the non-official sector, representing 80.9% and 19.1%, respectively. Of the total number of students enrolled in the official sector, 96.8 percent attended public schools and 3.2 percent attended private schools (by contract). Of the total number of students enrolled in 2022, 7,382,035 (75.9 percent) attended educational institutions in urban areas and 2,347,933 (24.1

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<sup>1</sup> In Spanish, the word used by academics, educators and state authorities is *competencia*, which comes from the English word *competencies*. In the case of Spanish, the semantic richness for this word is not as diverse as in English. As Arifin (2021) points out, the term 'competency' is a 'fuzzy' concept (Wong, 2020) which may lead to misinterpretation because the terms 'competence' and 'competency' can be used interchangeably without proper justifications. The first term, *competency*, is a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities or attitude. The second term, *competence*, refers to task-oriented behavioral approaches. In our opinion, in the Spanish-speaking world, the confusion remains. We have chosen to use the word *competencies*, as we consider it to be the most direct transliteration of the term.

percent) in rural areas. The Ministry faces the challenge of working with an overly complex country with strong regional, environmental, and cultural differences and the longest unresolved armed conflict in the world. In the context of a strong commitment to the efficiency of national policies and with the highest budget of all state entities since 2020 (47 billion Colombian pesos in 2020/ US 11 billion dollars), the Ministry of Education in Colombia has focused its educational policy on the semantic globalized field of "educational quality" and the discourse of competences (MEN, 2022), which is in a clear problematic relationship with basically economic guidelines focused on the notion of quality of education as Posca (2024) points out for Europe, but in our opinion, that view applies at a global level, and without any doubt is occurring in Colombia.

In a country as complex and diverse as Colombia, we believe that examining a discourse that standardizes education is an important exercise in the context of assessing the social, cultural, and environmental complexity of the country. These socio-cultural and environmental dimensions are part of the educational principles that the Constitution of 1991 consecrates for Colombia (Articles 67, 68, 69, 79), and which are summarized in Table 1. These mandates are part of the educational reforms that the country achieved with the new Constitution of 1991. They represent the expression of decades of struggles by students, teachers, and society, and are the expression of a peace agreement, which Colombian society claimed to the constituents: an education of excellence as an expression of the participatory processes that led to the new Constitution of 1991.

**Table 1**

*Principles of education enshrined in the 1991 Constitution of Colombia*

| Principle | Description                                                                        |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1         | Education as a Fundamental Right.                                                  |
| 2         | The prevalence of children's rights over those of other sectors of the population. |
| 3         | The co-responsibility of the State, society, and the family in education.          |
| 4         | Compulsory basic education up to grade nine.                                       |
| 5         | The autonomy of universities.                                                      |
| 6         | The right to a free personality.                                                   |
| 7         | Bilingual education in Indigenous communities.                                     |
| 8         | Freedom of education, research, and teaching.                                      |
| 9         | The compulsory teaching of civic education and the Constitution.                   |
| 10        | Promotion of science and culture.                                                  |

*Source:* Cifuentes & Camargo (2016, p. 32), based on the 1991 Constitution, translation by authors.

This Constitution was the culmination of a peace and coexistence pact with several guerrilla groups that had been incorporated into civilian life by the end of the late 1980s (M19,

Ejército Popular de Liberación (Epl), Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT) y Movimiento Quintín Lame (Indigenous guerrilla). The new Constitution was an important advance for the nation in terms of the transition from a State governed by the rule of law to a social state governed by the rule of law that more clearly guaranteed human, ethnic, and environmental rights. The novel proposal of school autonomy for a centralist country like Colombia was legally anchored in the 1991 Constitution and in Law 115 of National Education (1994). In our opinion, many of these constitutional and legal advances are being held back by the competency-based education model which imposes a technocratic vision of education that ignores many of the constitutional principles of the educational reforms summarized in Table 1.

### *Competency-based Education: The Context*

We are faced with an educational model that is very influential in the world; it should be noted that education and educational actors in Colombia, such as the Ministry of Education, Faculties of Education, multilateral organizations, universities, and colleges, are currently organizing their lessons, plans, curricula, evaluations and planning processes according to the logic and rationality of the CBE, which can be affirmed as part of neoliberal governmentality in education. In the Spanish-speaking world, the most representative critical work is the book *Educar por competencias, ¿Qué hay de nuevo?* [*Educating by Competencies, What's New?*], coordinated by José Gimeno Sacristán (2009) and produced with the support of several authors. The book reflects the importance of this concept and the variety of approaches used to explain and understand, either positively or critically, the notion of competencies in education.

It should be kept in mind that the notion of competencies, in the history of its recent use, is not strictly an educational demand, but rather comes from the business world and the skills they are demanding from formal educational institutions for the last 15 or 20 years (Hoevel, 2021; Gimeno-Sacristan, 2009; Laval, 2006). The working logic of the competency-based approach has been indicated in the OECD's (OCDE in Spanish) own discourse:

(...) Our definition of skills and competencies for the 21st century conceptualizes them as those skills and competencies necessary for young people to be effective workers and citizens of the knowledge society of the 21st century (OECD, 2010, p. 6).

Thus, the study of the notion of competencies leads to the study of the rationality of the state's appropriation of international policies concerning Western-centrism and elitism in education (Wu, 2022) and the forms of control and power over people, communities, and educational institutions, which are conceived as part of what Carlos Hoevel (2021, p.21.) has defined as the academic industry, and whose main feature is the imposition of an administrative, business logic imposed on educational and academic institutions. In the political context, the discourse of competencies is camouflaged in rhetorical figures that appeal to pluralism, diversity, inclusion, recognition, and transversality of knowledge, among many others. The discourse has valuable theoretical references and is based on leading authors in the field of contemporary Western thought (López, León, and Pérez, 2018), useful for legitimizing a discourse that is justified from the scientific-educational logic and from the context of state articulation with pluralistic engagement. In the Colombian case, it is justified paradoxically, based on criteria presumably granted by the Political Constitution of 1991 (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991) and the General

Education Law (Ley 115 de Educación General de Colombia), whose content in these two fundamental documents never mentions the concept of competence.

Gimeno Sacristan (2009) makes the following reference to the neo-concept of competencies in the field of education:

To what world does this way of *educating by competencies* take us? For some, it leads us to a society of efficient individuals concerning the grand machinery of the productive system, which requires adapting to the demands of the competitiveness of global market economies. Others feel that it is a movement that focuses on education as a training in which competence summarizes the range of the broad functions and the great individual or collective, intellectual, affective goals... of education. For others, we are facing the opportunity to restructure the educational systems from the inside, overcoming the instruction occupied in obsolete contents that are barely functional, to achieve a society that is not only efficient but also democratic and inclusive (Gimeno-Sacristán, 2009, p. 10).

In this regard, the Economic Commission for Latin America, and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2014, p.15) links economic development to the discourse of competencies: Economic growth implies educational competencies in the context of significant efforts to achieve greater and more equitable growth that is understood as the development of competencies from the earliest school years, in a direct relation to labor market values. Consequently, competence discourse is a phenomenon related to the globalization of the world.

As mentioned, we are faced with a hegemonic model and dominant educational discourse. Therefore, the discourse on competencies in education is expressed at a hegemonic level globally. If we consult *Scopus* (January 2024) with the category of competency-based education, it will be noted that global production in the field of education has been favorably inclined towards the incorporation of this approach since 2002. The United States is the country with the most production with 2818 documents, followed by Canada with 790 documents. The university with the highest production is the University of Toronto (Canada), followed by the University of Ottawa (Canada). In the Hispanic world, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico are the countries with the highest number of documents. CBE is a model integrated into the model of educational quality, which, in the words of the Colombian educator Rodrigo Jaramillo, is articulated as bipolar and unidimensional thinking (Jaramillo, 2015, pp. 10-12). We must consider that the model is part of the pedagogical discourse of most educational institutions and educators in the world; the discourse of competencies is part today of our imaginaries and social representations, and in most cases, as educators, we are unaware of the power relations the discourse manages.

In Chile, for example, Villarroel & Bruna (2014) emphasize the value (in a trend that is generalized throughout the region from Mexico to Argentina) of the competency model in the integral formation of students. On the contrary, for Olga Espinosa (2014, pp. 156-157), the discourse of competencies in university teacher education in Chile is marked by the following conditions:

We find that the discourse of competencies is inserted in higher university education, using statements arranged in a causal logic, presenting a neutral discourse, solid in its arguments regarding its pertinence, endorsed of its relevance, supported by rhetoric that appeals to consensus and validity. However, this stability of the causal logic is in tension with the statements in which serious difficulties are

identified for its implementation in specific university contexts (Espinosa, 2014, pp. 156-157).

For Mexico, the CBE is linked to polytechnic universities and is understood essentially related to the world of work, and the achievement of relevant skills and behaviors in each worker according to their specific work context (Manzur, Balcázar & Ponce Cruz, 2021). CBE in México can be said to be a well-established model, which, however, is not considered static but must adapt to the transformations of the country. However, for Luis Palacios Ortega (2021), an important point is that CBE, in the case of México, is not a definitive proposal "There is no approach that would allow for a curriculum formulation by the different national realities or a post-pandemic approach" (Palacios, 2021).

In the case of Colombia, the institutional response of the public and private agents that make up the education sector in Colombia has been very receptive to the approach of the country's highest educational authority (MEN); however, its hegemonic implementation, as pointed out in this paper, has no constitutional or legal basis, beyond the educational guidelines formulated by the MEN (See table 2).

**Table 2**

*Semantic evolution of the concept of competencies discourse in the educational system in Colombia*

| Legal document                                                                  | Semantic presence of the notion of competencies | Status                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1886 Constitution                                                               | Non- existent notion                            | Not active law                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 1991 Constitution                                                               | Non- existent notion                            | Active law                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Law 115 of 1994                                                                 | Non- existent notion                            | Active law                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Documents of competencies (MEN, 2004, 2006, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2016, 2022) | Predominant notion                              | Active guidelines are very influential in the education system with no legal status.<br><br>Its spirit is not in accordance with the country's Constitution nor with the general education law 115. |

Source: Authors

Few studies in Colombia have focused on studying the logic of the discourse of competencies. On one hand, a few critical studies have been developed by Restrepo (2006), Salas Zapata (2005), De Zubiría (2002), and Jaramillo-Roldán (2015). On the other hand, few studies in favor of the approach are found Marín Ardila (2002), Mejía (2000), and (Chaux, et.al, 2004). In the case of Colombia, the notion of competencies has been linked with citizenship training, but in this study, our focus is the notion of competence in its articulation with the use of language. Citizen competencies, in governmental rationality, is not our focus of study, although the Colombian State has emphasized the notion of competencies as a formative expression of citizen competencies. The

Colombian government since 2004 has developed the notion of citizenship education from the concept of citizenship competencies (in guidelines, never through laws or decrees, see table 2), which, as we have mentioned, adopts, and adapts the globalized discourse of competencies to the national reality based on the guidelines set by the OECD, the World Bank, or the European Commission.

In the case of Colombia, as in many other countries, the role of the State is outstanding in the social construction of reality and in the dissemination of the discourse of competencies, which has no contact or relationship, as we have discovered with the Colombian contemporary pedagogical movement (Tamayo, 2002) or the pedagogical history of the country (Jimenez, 2018), nor with the cultural and regional diversity of the country, even though the discourse recognizes cultural diversity as part of the values that education most promote (MEN, 1998 MEN, 2006; 2011a, 2011b, 2016). Over the last 7 years, we had the opportunity to read and consult many master's degree theses in education, we identified, that the concept of competence is blindly adopted by students and teachers in their research projects as a concept used to discipline the "disorder" or indiscipline of students and teachers, giving them a sense of the purposes of education, without a real understanding of what it means to talk about competencies. From our own experience, we see that even universities in Colombia have stopped talking about education or knowledge as an intellectual and academic dimension since the discourse of competencies has absorbed the entire semiosphere of education. Without being the subject of our research, Yolanda Rodríguez's (2010) studies on citizenship in Colombia conclude that state intervention tends to weaken the role and importance of civil society, an argument that coincides with the findings of this research when we consider state intervention in the field of education. In terms of the state's views on education, the Colombian state has completely overlooked the contributions of social movements or intellectual schools of thought concerning popular education in Colombia and Latin America.

Now, the emergence of the concept of competences in the Colombian case is situated in the governmental and political context of neoliberalism, basically the two governments of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006/2006-2010), whose rhetoric was marked by political agendas centered on so-called "democratic security", whose logic was markedly militaristic, and in the dictates of a "communitarian state", which focused primarily on protecting neo-corporate interests in the investment security of big capital (Cárdenas, 2012, 2013, 2014).<sup>2</sup> The expression of this dynamic, in the Colombian case, can be seen in the postulates of public education policy that originated in the neoliberal governments of César Gaviria (1990-1994), Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002), and whose development and implementation continued in the two presidential terms of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006 and 2006-2010). The competence discourse is also evident in the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014/2014-2018), Iván Duque (2018-2022), and in the current left-wing government of Gustavo Petro (2022-), where his education ministers understand education fundamentally in terms of competences (MEN, 2022). The paradox is that, except for President Gustavo Petro, the previous governments were declared neoliberal governments whose governmental actions have stimulated paradoxical processes of

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<sup>2</sup> The roots of neoliberalism can be traced back to the Walter Lippmann Colloquium (1938). For a comprehensive study on the origins of neoliberalism, in its main strands, see Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot's *The New Way of the World: An Essay on Neoliberal Society* (2013). The influence of neoliberalism in schools, as objects of neoliberal intervention, has been affected at least since the 1980s of the twentieth century. See also Christian Laval, *La escuela no es un negocio* (2004) (*School is not a business*).



statism throughout the Colombian educational system, and whose effect is a soft authoritarianism within the Colombian educational system. It is confirmed that the discourse of competencies is today a pedagogical discourse, not only in Colombia but in most countries that belong to Western civilization (Suddaby, 2005; Sundström & Fernández, 2013).

It can be argued that CBE is related to the so-called clinical pedagogy (Holmboe et al., 2017), whose experiential basis is oriented towards aseptic educational criteria modeled on biomedical approaches used in medical faculties, especially in their 'bedside' interactions between doctor and patient. According to Elizabeth O'Brien, this pedagogical practice, given its clinical structure, can overshadow and render invisible the experience and subjectivity of participants in an educational relationship that should be open to discovery, intersubjective exploration, and critical resistance as a means of expression for all actors in the educational system (O'Brien, 2023, pp. 19-38).

## Method

Given the semantic, rhetorical, conceptual, and practical weight that the category of competencies has experienced over several years in determining the fields of global education and in almost all disciplines (Suddaby, 2005; Sundström & Fernández, 2013), a process of discourse phenomenological analysis was used, focused on the study of the category of competencies, its diffusion, and appropriation in a country like Colombia. The objective was to analyze the category of education through competencies, from a dialogue with political, pedagogical, and epistemological approaches, concerning the studies of order, dynamism, and chaos (Voegelin, 2006). Education, as a social (socialization), cultural (enculturation), and institutional practice, is inserted in a use of language that is not neutral and that can be analyzed from numerous interpretive approaches anchored in the semiotics of discourse (Zecchetto, 2012) and whose various possibilities, as Jaques Fontanille (2001) points out, are not exhausted in the present analysis guided by discourse analysis.

As part of the procedure, we looked at the texts considering them as empirical objects that represent language as a social phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by social structures, power relations, and cultural contexts. By examining the use of language, narratives, and discourse, we have recognized that government policies exercise and reflect power, negotiate identities, and disseminate ideologies and control (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 2002; Van Dijk, 2008). Discourse analysis is considered empirically grounded in social science and epistemology because it systematically examines language as a social phenomenon, recognizes the social construction of reality through discourse, explores power dynamics and ideologies, emphasizes context sensitivity, employs qualitative research methods, takes an interdisciplinary approach, and incorporates reflexivity into the research process.

## *Research Question*

The fundamental question in the analysis of the discursive corpus produced by the Ministry of Education was the following: What are the deep meanings that underlie the rationality of the category of competencies inserted in the discourse of the Ministry of National Education of Colombia?

### *Working hypothesis*

The contents and intertextuality of the discursive corpus that constitutes the messages that configure the CBE of the Ministry of Education (MEN) as a public educational policy are the expressions of modernity that reflect the educational tensions of globalization under the category of a dominant interpretive discourse that connotes violence, as Alain Touraine (2009) points out; and that sets the mentality and moral schemes of the ruling technocratic elite in control of the state and many public and private educational institutions.

Paradoxically, the educational institutions of the so-called Second or Third World countries uncritically define their educational agenda according to the criteria imposed or suggested by the countries of the First World, in what can be defined as a global dynamic of imposed acculturation. The discourse of competencies, falsely presented as an original construct of the MEN, has had an enormous influence on the definition of the educational experience of the school and university systems in Colombia. The process has been widely incorporated into the language and discourse of advisors, educators, bureaucrats, and consultants of the educational system. The CBE is related to a technocratic mentality and dominant and hegemonic political currents of thought in the field of education, in a dynamic similarly captured in other countries (Echavarría and De los Reyes, 2017). In the medium and long term, the competency-based approach, as the dominant interpretive discourse, expresses subtle processes of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2002), eliminating the dynamics of intercultural dialogue, an extremely serious situation in a culturally diverse country like Colombia, and where schools in many rural areas have been affected by what Camilo Mateus (2023) calls hybrid violence, whose one of its components, in our opinion, is the violence of the educational models imposed by the State.

### *Procedure: discursive phenomenological analysis (DIPA)*

The results we are presenting account for our critical reading on how we as researchers are interpreting an educational public policy. What we call DIPA is a modified version of the guidelines for conducting IPA (Smith et al., 2009) in the sense that we integrate hermeneutic, semiotic readings, interviews, direct observation, archives consultation, and critical discourse analysis as part of the iterative and inductive process of analysis. Following these guidelines, the steps were: (1) reading and re-reading all the material (2) noting and coding (3) developing memos and emergent themes (4) discovering and searching for connections and networks between codes, memos, and quotes (5) looking for patterns, dominant themes, dominant concepts, and categories.

### *Instruments*

The instrument is adapted to a process of discursive-textual analysis organized based on the construction of a hermeneutic unit designed using the program, *Atlas. Ti* version 7 and *Atlas.Ti* version 23. The complexity of the discursive analysis is supported by computational tools that have already been implemented for several years, the use of which is synthesized in this work from the model originally proposed by Seidel and Clark (1984) and that has a more recent systematization in the work of Penalba, Alaminos, Francés, and Santacreu (2015). Thus, the project has been organized around the construction of codes, memos, families, and categorizations that we present in this article.

Due to space limitations, the following findings present a thematic grouping of emerging codes and themes that synthesize the key findings of the research. The purpose of critical analysis is to go beyond the surface of discursive content by making visible networks of meaning that are at the basis of the rationality of the issuer, whose voice is that of the State.

## Results

For Colombia, the research developed within the framework of the analysis of public educational policies confirms how the concept of competencies has semantically displaced the concept of education. This is evident in the main documents of the country's educational policy. A careful reading of these writings, using the analysis program Atlas Ti 7 and Atlas Ti 23, shows surprisingly how the concept of competence displaces the signifier education in the government discourse. The average semantic and linguistic displacement is 52%. That is, gradually from 2004 to 2022, the term competency is the most used category in documents related to the public policy of MEN; in some official documents, the category of education is non-existent, and the word competence is the dominant emerging category.

### *Analytical Dimensions and Findings on the Meanings of the Notion of Competencies*

In this section, the analytical reading of the findings on the meanings that unfold the notion of competencies found in the MEN documents is presented. We will attempt to critically synthesize our findings based on the analysis of 3273 generated codes and 418 memos created based on the documents of MEN.

*1. Speech generalities.* In summary, the surface of the discourse states the actions needed to guarantee quality education in Colombia. It focuses on the importance of developing citizenship skills through state guidelines for human development. It also mentions the need to close inequity gaps and encourage the participation of society in education, again through the State's indications. In addition, the importance of evaluation and student participation is highlighted, as well as the inclusion of ethnic groups and people with special needs. At this point, there is no ethnographic reference to support the generality of the country's cultural diversity or the impact of the competencies discourse on cultural systems. Finally, the role of the educational community in the education of students and the importance of fostering democratic practices and citizenship skills in education are highlighted, in versions of the concept of active citizenship without theoretical references.

*2. Quantitative analysis.* The signifier: competencies (based on Atlas.ti 23) exceed the signifier education in the order of 52% in the total record of concepts for seven documents analyzed (MEN, 2016a; MEN, 2012; MEN, 2011a; MEN, 2011b; MEN, 2009b; MEN, 2006; MEN, 2004) corresponding to the period between the years 2004-2016. It is objectively recorded that the concept even semantically displaces the notion or category of education. There is evidence of the displacement of a key signifier: the sign of education by the sign of competence, which becomes the dominant sign in the lexicographic structure of government discourse. See Figure 1.

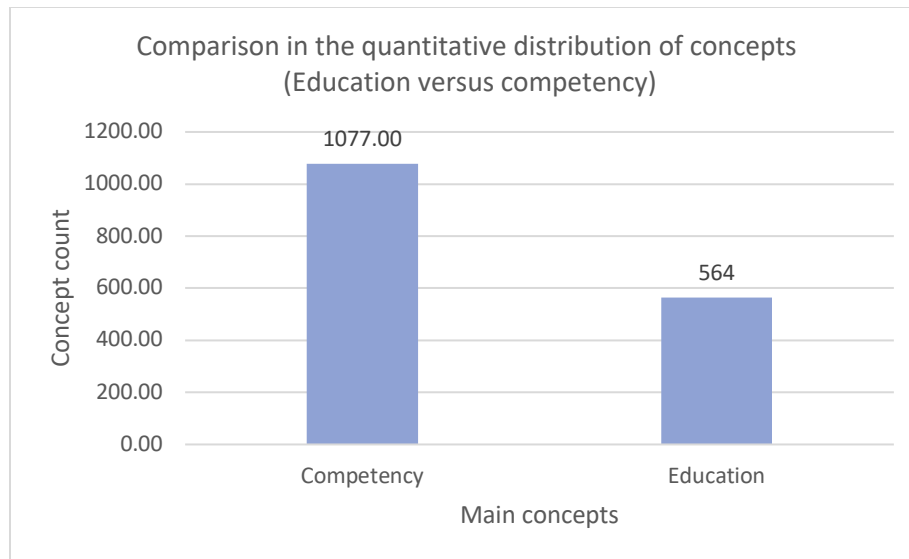


Figure 1. Concept counts between education and competency. *Source:* Authors.

Competence, or competencies become analogical concepts that in the case of the MEN discourse are used with various semantic combinations: basic, cognitive, citizenship, emotional, integrative, childhood competencies, etc. See Figure 2. The semantic dimensions of competencies discourse.

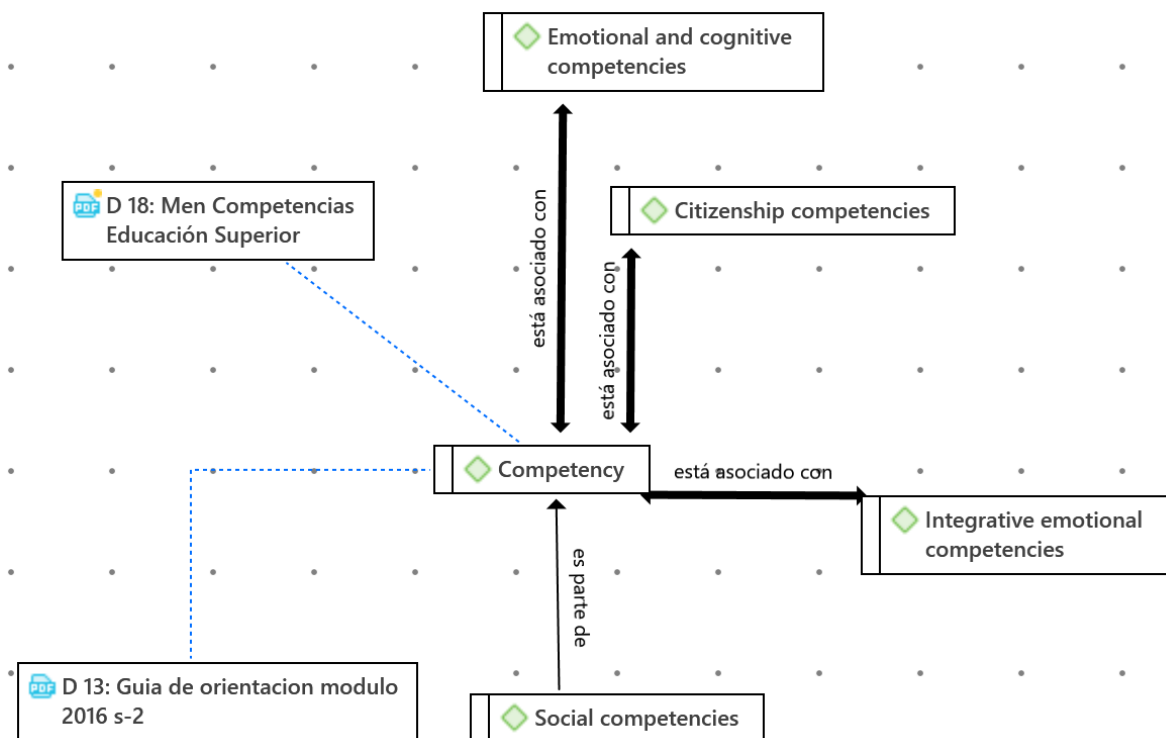


Figure 2. The semantic relations of competencies discourse. *Source:* Authors

### 3. *Scientism.*

The following pages are the result of the formulation of the citizenship competency standards and are intended to serve as a guide for both teachers and parents on this set of principles so that we can all join the project with clear and shared goals. (MEN, 2004)

Scientism is short-sighted and does not allow the national debate on education in different dimensions: being human, person, space, community, school culture, cultural values, ethics, representations, traditions, social experience, and social imaginaries of reality, which denotes a scientific structure that does not dialogue with knowledge that could be considered as classical and valuable in the field of education. It does not consider the possibility of considering other fundamental concepts for education, such as virtues, conscience, soul, spirit, becoming, being, character, tradition, knowledge, and even education. For example, the word *virtue* does not exist in the governmental educational discourse of the Colombian state. The concept of competence derives from the educational tension between traditional and modern societies. It can be affirmed that the educational discourse focused on competencies invalidates the dialogue with elements of social tradition that are part of the cultural identity of the Colombian nation. There is no dialogue with theoretical elements that build bridges with any educational philosophy in a concrete way. To a certain extent, in the reading of the MEN documents, it can be said that education is reduced to a mere technique and training: the execution of a specific protocol in which the step-by-step necessary to achieve the result prescribed by an external agent is followed, without any demand for reflection on the part of the executor. The process of incorporating the notion of competencies can be considered as belonging to a vertical and hierarchical paradigm, even if the process is presented by the government authority as validated by mechanisms of civic participation that had active links with representatives of the academy. This process is presented as participatory and horizontal within a discursive development that justifies the emergence of the concept from dialogical and consensual processes. It appeals to an inclusive and horizontal language in which the state is presented as a horizontal actor with interinstitutional developments.

### 4. *Statism and excessive government regulations.*

Preschool education is currently governed by Decree 2247 of 1997, including its evaluation. However, within the framework of the current policy, the MEN has built an instrument for the description of competencies of transition grade students, which will be disclosed and applied in the second semester of this year. (MEN, 2009b)

The discourse of competencies gradually places the State as the highest educational authority, displacing the role of families and society as part of the educational authorities that the Education Law 115 (1994) recognized as part of the Colombian educational system. The state presents itself as an expert in education, setting guidelines and hiring recognized academics who collaborate in legitimizing the country's public education policy at all levels, from early childhood education to higher education. The State, from its Ministry of Education, imposes the concept, validating its proposal from articulation with some sectors of the Colombian academy that have served to legitimize and position the social appropriation of competencies in various areas of knowledge. In the framework of a complete quality system, educational institutions are required to use the category of competencies and the ideas related to it. Institutions, especially public ones, that do not adopt this logic run the risk of being punished in the processes of measurement and

evaluation of training that students and institutions undergo from childhood to adult education. In this respect, the basic standards of competence are the cornerstone of the evaluation proposals and the improvement processes leading to the quality of MEN education:

For this reason, the Ministry of National Education is committed to recognizing and articulating the various initiatives that are being developed so that we can lead, as an education sector, the regulatory, technical, and operational processes that guide the actions of educational institutions, education secretariats and other actors around the creation of a system of school coexistence and training for the exercise of human rights. (MEN, 2011a, pp.6-7)

The discourse has been alive for 22 years and its academic and social results, considering the social conflicts of the country and whose students have been trained in this approach, show the existing tensions in most official institutions that are standardized due to the incorporation of the competency-based educational approach, which is intended to permeate the entire curriculum and school life. An iconic element of the gradual and excessive state regulation of education in Colombia is Decree 1075 of 2015, issued by the presidency of the republic during the government of Juan Manuel Santos (Presidencia de la República, 2015). The decree, which spans 489 pages, aims to constitute an "exercise of compilation of pre-existing regulations." This reveals a statist and regulatory mentality, and even now, the decree has been modified by other decrees.

#### *5. Power and influence.*

For this reason, the Ministry of National Education is committed to recognizing and articulating the various initiatives that are being developed so that we can lead, as an educational sector, the normative, technical, and operational processes that guide the actions of educational institutions, education secretariats, and other actors in the creation of a system of school coexistence and training for the exercise of human rights. (MEN, 2011)

The construction of the category of competencies has defined educational practices at all levels of education: preschool, primary school, secondary school, vocational secondary school, higher education, and universities. Let's not forget: the name of education in Colombia is competencies. The lives of teachers and students in all sectors are now affected by the notion of competence in their performance and evaluation. Those who have more than three decades of experience in the field of university academic life or contact with education in the public field are now faced with a concept that emerged out of the administrative requirements into the academic and school systems, influencing all teaching and research activities. The feeling of many academics is that of being instrumentalized and managed by administrative powers that pretend to know the meaning of education when it is limited to the field of so-called competencies and fully justified by the rationality of management, in a discursive logic that is presented as omnipotent and cannot be discussed. The notion of competence has been imposed on the life of the country's educational systems without further discussion or debate.

The truth is that the discourse that articulates the development of meanings about competencies has strongly conditioned educational practice. Education in Colombia, from early childhood (MEN, 2009a; 2009b) to university education, is standardized under the guidelines of the State, based on the symbolic operator: competence. Unfortunately, the critical evaluation of these dynamics, which can be described as a process of nationalization of education in Colombia, is underdeveloped in the field of Colombian academia, which can be considered unpretentious in

the formulation of scientific readings compared to the opinions of the Ministry of Education. It should be noted that this State body is the one that grants, regulates, accredits, validates, and renews degrees, licenses, and qualifications of educational institutions in Colombia. We are talking about a giant organization with a lot of power, that has organized intellectual production in Colombia from the category of competencies.

It can be assumed that critical academic voices are silenced by subtle mechanisms of legitimation that manipulate academia to structure the academic body of public policy documents. Prestigious academics are hired to develop the scientific content of the official paper, which is presented as original, when in fact it is an idea derived from multilateral organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank, which indirectly manage the country's educational agenda.

In the formal structure of the MEN documents, the correlation begins with a letter or an introduction by the minister in office, a brief statement that is then followed by a long structuring discursive body, very complex, full of tables, diagrams, and very technical language, prepared by academics hired to give the ministry document a "rigorous technical seal". Thus, the appearance of the emerging *competencies* code has been justified.

#### 6. Legitimization mechanisms.

The national government set itself the task of advancing an Educational Revolution and established it as the first of its tools for social equity, with the full conviction that education is the way to guarantee peace, ensure equal opportunities, and contribute to the country's development. (MEN, 2006)

The reading of these documents related to the public policy of the State allows us to affirm that in the letter or the initial prologue that the Ministry signs and briefly prefaces, using grandiloquent words such as "educational revolution." There is no mention of the theoretical content the text develops after the minister's speech. This casts doubt on whether the Minister has read the entire body of the document that defines public policy on education and that he or she is signing? For example, in 2006, the minister's letter had no relation with the theoretical body and the contents developed in the document signed by the highest educational authority in the country and the government representative (MEN, 2006). In any case, considering or under the hypothetical assumption that the Minister does not seem to read the entire document that is presented, the result has been that, in the educational systems of Colombia, the subjective appropriation of the category of competencies has strongly defined the perspective of meaning and educational experience of the vast majority of institutions responsible for education, including universities, in a clear statist process that does not dialogue or take into real consideration the cultural and social diversity of the country which was fundamental to the constitutional reference summarized in table 1 above.

The subtitle of one of the documents entitled *Basic Standards of Competence in Language* (MEN, 2006)) is eloquent enough to establish that the State, through the government in power, paradoxically recognized as neoliberal, proposes a vertical and centralized educational policy that states "*what students should know and what they should do with what they learn*" in the context of an "Educational Revolution" (MEN, 2006). This expression is an authoritarian reference that negates the subsequent participatory statements and the same social processes that the Ministry has put forward to validate the infiltration of what has been defined as an educational neo-language since statements such as this instrumentalize education with grandiloquent words: educational revolution, social participation, social equity. The process is legitimized through an alliance with

recognized private and public actors and associations, the relationship with the Colombian Association of Education Faculties (Ascofade). However, the analysis of the documents reveals the verticality and logic of the intervention of the Ministry, which defines “what the country's students should learn” within the framework of the so-called Educational Revolution, according to the introductory words of Minister Cecilia María Vélez White in Decree 1290 of 2009 (MEN, 2009).

### *7. Dominant interpretive discourse.*

... what students should know and be able to do... (MEN, 2011, pp. 23-24)

It can be affirmed that the entire public discourse of the ministry is a dominant interpretative discourse whose core implies the indoctrination of the mass of Colombians, although there are rhetorical figures that speak of participation, cultural differences, and human rights. We are dealing with a very sophisticated cultural code that is embodied in a discourse that appeals to globalist notions: human rights/quality education/democratic citizenship/human development/active citizenship:

In this sense, developing in all students the skills, knowledge, and skills necessary to build democratic and active citizenship is a fundamental challenge since it responds to the quality of educational policy and specifies the objective of leading the country on the path of prosperity. We are convinced that human development requires citizens who are respectful of the common good, who know how to find, value, and protect the richness that is in difference, and who actively participate in the construction of the Social Rule of Law that Colombia promotes and defends>> (MEN, 2011a, p. 6).

As the work of Pierre Bourdieu (2002) and Alain Touraine (2009) suggests, any dominant interpretive discourse (DID), in this case the notion of competencies, can be a condition that generates physical, symbolic, or structural violence. For Touraine, DID is understood as the set of representations that allow the construction of a general image of social life and the experience of individuals. We are talking about ideological positions that impose concepts, stories, practices, and narratives on reality. Complementing the notion of DID, Pierre Bourdieu's (2002) symbolic violence concept is key for the understanding of the processes of domination, whether personal or class. We are in the field of submissions that are not perceived as such, but it is shaping "collective expectations" or representations of the vast majority of actors in the Colombian educational system; those representations function as "socially inculcated beliefs" that are not discussed, they are simply followed, and they have the power to transform relations of domination and submission into affective, charismatic relations (Bourdieu, and Wacquant, 1992).

We are faced with a powerful discourse that is always telling civil society what to do in all areas of education and life: it wants to regulate everything from notions such as citizenship education, institutional development, Political knowledge, Legal and Social Awareness, etc. (MEN, 2011b, p. 26; MEN, 2006, p.30; MEN, 2003, p. 15).

Even leisure and free time is regulated in the life of students:

The planning of activities for the use of leisure time is carried out from the approach of citizenship competencies for the exercise of Human Rights” (MEN, 2011b, p. 26).

### *8. Intertextualities.*



Another idea that tends to appear when thinking about science and the people who do science is that it is a solitary activity, typical of gifted beings such as Newton, Freud, Einstein, or Marx. (MEN, 2006, p. 98)

Globalism is recognized as a world force that can be above the state. This is an early reference to the issue and becomes central if we consider that the concept of competencies was not present in the state education policy in Colombia around the year 1998. Six years later, it will be the concept forced by the globalist agenda and followed by the Colombian government since the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (See: MEN, 2011b, p. 6-17). A discourse whose intertextuality comes from behavioral psychology, economics, medical sciences, and administration. The behaviorist discourse has no explicit reference in the whole discursive corpus, it mimics, presenting the proposal as constructivist in its bibliographical references (MEN, 2006, pp. 99-143; MEN, 1998, p. 13). It may appeal to Marxist references in the context of the conservative government of Andres Pastrana (MEN, 1998). Ultimately, it is expressed as a construct that originates in the epistemic terrain of Cartesian rationalism and its modern development in reference "to the State is understood as a generator of society" (MEN, 1998).

From these considerations, a way of thinking is deduced that expresses the meaning of education in the hands of a political and educational technocracy that seeks to implement modes of obedience (Barrio Maestre, 2016) using technical and neutral language, affecting the modes of existence of millions of persons in Colombia.

As an expression of the myth of modernity, the notion of competencies establishes a relationship of order-obedience articulated to the indoctrination and domestication of the state towards society in a logic marked by a language with technical pretensions and whose dominant reason reflects thinking that generatively triggers an institutionality that can end up forgetting metaphorical and figurative notions that are axial to the education of the human person, such as the necessary understanding of cultural diversity and even the metaphorical reference to the transcendent dignity of the human being (Barrio-Maestre, 2016, pp. 29-83 ). The subject-object distinction structures an instrumental, utilitarian, and disciplinary reason (Foucault, 1981). The notion of competence conditions the behavior of people and institutions, in most cases uncritically, because the educational authority has indicated it as relevant and the way forward development of the country and even the evolution of education (without talking of education).

There is an emphasis on the reflective and deliberate formation of concepts such as civic competencies, but the question arises of who defines and from what horizon of meaning the characteristics of citizens are defined? and how these competencies can be measured and evaluated? The replacement of classical concepts such as the person, civic education, or knowledge is evident in all the discourse, showing the absence of an adequate philosophy of education. In the long term, the pragmatic effect will be the indoctrination of citizens subject to the power of the state and the subordination of educational institutions to the power of the state in the context of liberal democracies, neo-liberal governments, and even leftist governments. The replacement of values and virtues by the concept of rights. A shift from the notion of civic education (Barrio-Maestre, 2016) to the theme of civic competencies with no reference to noetic concepts in education (Voegelin, 2006).

We are faced with a discursive practice that has defined a working horizon of education in Colombia. As Foucault points out about discourses (1970, p. 81), they have "systematically shaped the objects of which they speak (...)", marking and defining educational spaces, objects, and

practices. Beyond Foucault, Eric Voegelin's (2006) studies on order are key to understanding the displacement of the notion of education by the concept of competencies; this situation is reminiscent of Western gnosis in its dominant discourses that mark the experience of order in the post-Christian West in its main narratives, many of which completely exclude the recognition of other differential cosmologies, which are not necessarily formulated from the economic criteria that today define the dominant social and educational conversation that underlies the meaning of discursive concepts such as competencies.

The discursive matrix of the concept of competencies and the regimes of meaning that accompany the proposal, in its technocratic reading, excludes any reference to what Voegelin's work calls experiences of transcendence, cultural experiences, the experience of order/disorder, horizons of meaning; and without which it is not possible to understand the differentiated experience that education of Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman and American roots has exercised in the historical constitution of Colombia, as well as the so-called Western civilization (Voegelin, 2006; Cárdenas, 2014, 2010). In short, education becomes learning and training without a sense of life, or of cultural transmissions, which are understood as a function of contact with reality and dialogue with the dynamic traditions of the Colombian people and the deepest values of the Western civilization.

#### *9. The cultural context of the discourse.*

We are not competences, we are life” (Colombian mestizo teacher, 2024)

It must be considered that the discourse of competencies does not correspond to the country's cultural realities. We have heard testimonies from Indigneous *Wayúu* teachers in one of the most Indigneous departments in Colombia: La Guajira, located in the northern part of the country near the Caribbean Sea.<sup>3</sup> They told us with voices that offer a very unanimous perspective among Indigneous teachers:

We are told by the government to talk about competencies, but here the Indigneous teachers don't understand what it's all about. Our culture does not consider the concept of competencies! Most of us pretend to understand; we pretend to understand. (Wayúu teacher, 2022)

In the context of the Choco Department, the largest Afro-descendant region in the entire American continent,<sup>4</sup> an Afro-descendant teacher living in the capital city of Quibdó near the Pacific Ocean commented to us:

Here in Choco, black teachers have a different view of education, and the concept of competencies is not part of our life or culture; the concept is assumed as an obligation with the state, we are their employees, but the concept has nothing to do with our Afro-descendant cultures. (Afro-descendant teacher, 2023)

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<sup>3</sup> Wayúu, an Indigneous group in northernmost Colombia and northwest Venezuela. It is the largest Indigneous population in Colombia, with a population of 380,460 inhabitants for the year 2018, which represents 22% of the total Indigneous population of Colombia (DANE, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> The Colombian biogeographic Chocó is in western Colombia beside the Pacific Ocean, it constitutes a geostrategic region with rich biodiversity, and a particular majority presence of the population of Afro-Colombian descent in the continent, in addition to Indigneous peoples, and ethnic groups settled in collective territories that total close to five (5) million hectares (Ayala-Mosquera, 2023).

These two testimonies, which could be expanded with many others from different regions of Colombia, clearly reflect how the concerns of teachers and the cultures in which they are embedded, in practice, come into conflict with or oppose the educational policies of governments that promote an educational model based on competencies. There is a huge gap between the technocrat's beliefs and knowledge concerning the socio-cultural values and practices of the country's rural and Indigenous communities.

## Discussion and conclusions

The discourse of competencies is part of a proposal that seems to emphasize the theme of citizenship competencies, but the whole discourse revolves around the concept of competencies. The *Competencies Standards* are inserted into a discourse validated by an apparent and solid epistemological justification based on its construction in the recruitment that the MEN has made of academics of recognized trajectory (Ruíz & Chaux, 2005). As an expression of processes related to the country's modernization, the category of competencies is presented as a conceptual process aiming to overtake traditional education (Gimeno-Sacristan, 2009). From this perspective, the situation shows a crisis of meaning, as defined by Neut, Ribera, and Miño (2019), both in public policy and in the field of Colombian academic discourse, whose narrative in the context of an apparent plurality of meanings, faces a standardized educational logic, where the state tries to control, through subtle and transparent and plural rhetorical uses, the educational life of citizens, teachers, administrators and the official and private educational institutions of society in a highly cultural diverse country. The notion of competence from a totalizing perspective seeks to influence all areas of educational knowledge in the country. The state, as the main issuer of public policy, has enormous power, which is presented in a pluralistic form, in a condition like what has been described for Chile (Espinosa, 2014).

Public discourse appeals to the relatively amorphous and neutral category of competence from an instrumental perspective, which subjugates the human person and the existing institutionality in civil society. We are faced with a political paradox in terms of the design of the state itself: studies on the neoliberal state tell us that it cedes some of its functions to the private sector (Laval, 2004) but in Colombian reality, the state apparatus maintains an ideological conditioning of a statist nature in its management of the educational codes developed. From there, the MEN try to provide an educational guideline for the country that is not original. The discursive genre of so-called competencies is located within the content of the dominant interpretive discourse of the New World Order, which must be constantly articulated within a horizon that allows a banner of ideological clichés such as "competencies," "educational revolution," "the most educated country," among others.

The neo-language of competencies must be understood as an expression of the institutional crisis of the school and the educational institution, affected by the neoliberal institutional logic (Laval, 2004) and by the transformation of higher education into an academic industry devoured by "productive time" (Gimeno-Sacristan, 2008) and by univocal readings of the understanding of reality (Hoewel, 2021).

In short, the educational reflection imposed by the State ignores institutional readings that should be considered for the sake of educational improvement. The educational institution and the entire state educational system cannot impose in an authoritarian way, a logic, and an educational drift whose laudable objectives curtail the responsibility of parents, communities, and students themselves in their development. Statism, which is the ideological basis of the guidelines that the

State formulates from notions such as competence, has the effect of weakening the educational institutionality of civil society in all its dynamism. The monetary and spiritual cost of an educational concept that seeks to establish the criteria and principles of education from above, ends up generating a dependence with serious ontological, cultural, political, and economic consequences in civil society, which ends up looking to the State, as the only agent capable of establishing the educational criteria and the functioning of the educational institutions of a country.

Looking at the educational landscape of Colombia, it becomes clear that violence is not just an isolated phenomenon, but an integral part of the state's educational model. The manifestation of violence is multifaceted, extending beyond physical confrontations to include systemic issues deeply rooted in socio-political structures, where the state and its recent educational discourses reproduce symbolic violence in institutional educational organizations. Recognizing violence as inherent to the educational model calls for a critical reassessment of policy frameworks and requires a holistic and participatory approach that addresses not only the immediate manifestations but also the systemic roots that foster an environment of educational inequality and social injustice.

Finally, the background of the entire discursive code must be placed in the context of a mimetic narrative in which political and economic leaders defend "state capitalism," public interventionism, and social engineering. This framework distances Colombians from legal and constitutional objectives that spoke of an education of excellence, never of competencies (see Table 1: Educational Principles of the Colombian Constitution of 1991). We hope to have contributed to the current debate on the role of the state in education in a diverse country like Colombia. Many questions remain unanswered, and ethnographic work is needed to visualize the impact of a discourse such as the one analyzed.

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