

# Constructing an Identity: Environmental Educators in Mexico

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## **Abstract**

*The environmental education field in Mexico is a relatively new social space characterized by wide discursive proliferation and organized by regional hegemonies. In this context, a plurality of identification processes has taken place. There is not a singular environmental educator identity but a multiplicity of local definitions. In this paper, I focus on the case of the Environmental Educational Masters Program in Mexicali, Baja California from 1993 to 1999, where the ethical definition of environmental educator was naturalized as the sole true one. I trace the beginning of the field of environmental education in Mexico, and the marks of pioneer discourse in the professionalization of environmental education through this program. I use discourse analysis to consider the politics of inclusion/exclusion in a particular ideal of the environmental educator identity.*

## **Résumé**

*Le domaine de l'éducation environnementale au Mexique est un phénomène social relativement nouveau caractérisé par une prolifération discursive et par la production de hégémonies régionales. Dans ce contexte, divers processus d'identification ont eu lieu. Il n'existe pas de définition universelle d'un enseignant en études environnementales mais plutôt une multiplicité de définitions locales. Dans cet article, j'examine le cas du Programme de maîtrise en éducation environnementale offert à Mexicali, Baja, Californie entre 1993 et 1999. C'est dans le cadre de ce programme que la définition déontologique d'un enseignant en études environnementales a été précisée de façon définitive. Je trace le portrait des premiers balbutiements de l'éducation environnementale au Mexique et des œuvres d'importance déterminante des pionniers de ce programme qui ont contribué à la professionnalisation de l'éducation environnementale. Au moyen d'une analyse discursive, j'examine les politiques d'inclusion et d'exclusion relatives à un idéal particulier par rapport à l'identité de l'enseignant en études environnementales.*

Is there really an environmental education field in Mexico? How is it understood, and what are the features that characterize it? Can we talk about the environmental educator's identity or should we think about different definitional possibilities?

The Mexican environmental education field is a relatively new social space. Although since the early 70s international events have been organized wherein the participants agreed upon and stressed the importance of environmental education, meeting those agreements has been a slow and difficult process in Mexico. The ministry in charge of environmental issues, *Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología (SEDUE)* [Secretary of Urban and Ecological Development], was created in the early 80s. In 1985 a special office, *Departamento de Educación Ambiental* (Department of Environmental Education), was founded to develop this specific educational field. This constituted the first official attempt to deal with environmental education in Mexico.

It is crucial to state that the field has been characterized by the presence of a multiplicity of discourses<sup>1</sup> entailing a wide range of processes, forms, subjects, and procedures that represent a huge range of meanings constructed around the definition of what environmental education is or, rather, what is thought it should be. The existence of this plurality of identities is the outcome of political struggles. Hence, I argue that any definition of the environmental educator identity is the result of a hegemonic practice, that is to say, it is the product of a political and historical attempt to define its meaning. There is no essential environmental education professional identity, but rather there has been a certain naturalization process.

In this paper, I will deal with a specific area of the Mexican environmental education field, the professionalisation of environmental educators, and I will focus primarily on one of the hegemonic groups in the institutionalized network (Arias, 1998). This hegemonic group has strongly influenced the articulation of professional identity in two environmental education Master's programs in two different states of Mexico. I will also offer a complex reading of the identification process, noting the discursive and political accounting of the environmental education identity.

From a discourse analysis perspective (Laclau, 1990), the main goals of this paper are:

- to trace back the traces (in Derridean terms) of a hegemonic group in the environmental education professionalization field in Mexico as present in two education programs—focusing on the Mexicali one—and in doing so, show those programs to be a result of a hegemonic practice, and
- to offer a complex political/ethical reading of the formation of professional identities and argue a conceptual construction involving three analytical dimensions: political, ethical, and imaginary.

## Searching the *Traces* of a Hegemonic Practice

The environmental education field in Mexico, as any social space, has involved the development of articulatory practices, some of which led to the production of *hegemony*. From a discourse analysis perspective, the social is thought to be constitutively open and precariously fixed so that in this condition is the very possibility of a hegemonic practice:

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the "elements" have not crystallized into "moments." In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1992, p. 134)

In this analytical context, the social is seen as a proliferation of differences (elements) some of which become articulated (moments) around a *nodal point* (a signifier that organizes a discourse through a partial fixation of the flux meaning). The structuring of a social space involves the naturalization of an identity; therefore, there is an inclusion/exclusion game that is "forgotten" and reappears when the excluded elements (which did not disappear but remained on the discursive borders) attempt to dislocate the discursive order.

As for the professionalization of the environmental education field in Mexico, what were the historic discursive trends that afford the formation of a hegemonic discourse whose *traces* were sedimented in two education programs? Which signifiers were included and excluded? What version of the environmental educator identity was naturalized? In the following paragraphs, I will deal with those matters by reconstructing the "traces of power."

### *"Ecology" as a Nodal Point at the Emergence of an Environmental Education Discourse*

During Miguel De la Madrid's presidency, from 1982-1988, and especially in the first three years, a rationalization plan was displayed in response to the 1982 crisis that was a result of the "petroleum boom" (Rivera Ríos, 1986). The main purpose of this plan was to establish some order and reorganize state participation in the economy to come to a "rational" use of public money. The huge capital income resulting from the discovery of important oil resources was considered to be the cause of budget disorganization. In this context of a rationalizing policy, the SEDUE was created. Its conception of the environment, therefore, was an instrumental one, a narrow concept of the environment associated only with health problems caused by pollution. In those years, public health system expenses were considered the main problem. The governmental goal was to make both the administration and the use of public resources more efficient, and environmental care was supposed to help.

When the Departamento de Educación Ambiental emerged, the professionals in this office had a wider perspective of what ecology meant. They went beyond a mere technical approach, but they could not yet elaborate a more comprehensive and complex conception of this signifier which involved political, cultural, social, and ethical aspects. This situation was the outcome of:

- the initial idea of the concept of environment itself,
- the lack of a developed environmental field in Mexico, and
- the predominance of biologists in charge of the team (Édgar González-Gaudio was the only one who had a degree in pedagogy).

These aspects marked the first actions carried out by staff. According to Salvador Morelos, one of the pioneers in this field in Mexico, a certain ecological approach was stressed:

...[The] ecological issue [...] had to correspond to the environmental problematic of the country and then we began to diversify the topics but with a strong ecological stress because of our professional background. Although Édgar was a pedagogue ... Édgar said, "They were biologists, so in a way there is an ecological mark" [...] I do not mean that since the very beginning we thought that the environmental education was the teaching of biology, but there was an ecological emphasis on it." (Fuentes, 1998a, p. 5, translation by author)

### *A Socio-political Conception of Environmental Education: Teachers' Practice as a Strategy for Social Transformation*

In 1985, a national decree establishing the creation of the Programa Nacional de Educación Ambiental (National Environmental Education Program) was passed. This was a foundational gesture as it represented the first symbolic instituting performance. The actions considered in the program were mainly addressed to school teachers. Thus a priority was defined: to render teachers sensitive to environmental issues.

The staff of the Departamento considered that the transformation of the everyday work of teachers was the way to make changes in ecological matters:

[Since] the beginning, we argued that one of the most important efforts had to be related to the transformation of the everyday practice of school teachers—we established this view from the first texts we produced—and we thought that if everyday classroom activities were not transformed, then there would not be any important change at all. (Fuentes, 1998a, p. 5, translation by author)

The idea of "analyzing reality" was a central component of this action addressed to teachers, meaning fostering self-reflection on teachers' existential conditions, the way in which they develop their practice with regards to the

community where they teach and, in many cases, to which they belong. This social and political interest in the reality surrounding teachers' practice was one of the distinctive elements of this Departamento. From an institutional point of view (i.e. the two ministry authorities), however, this conception was considered contested, dangerous, and challenging to the status quo, and they feared the consequences this collective thinking might bring about. They associated these efforts with Marxism:

[Concerning the kind of courses designed to be offered to teachers]... so, they [the higher authorities] cancelled out these kinds of courses and they told us that it had been too conflictive a matter, "You are taking the wrong path ... what we want you to do is to teach ecology ... and you ... what happens is that you are Marxists, are you not? So, because you are Marxists we do not want you to stir up the schoolteachers..." Thus, the doors of the Distrito Federal [Mexico City] were closed to us and we could not carry on here anymore [...] so the program was basically developed in the provinces of the country. (Fuentes, 1998a, p. 8, translation by author)

Henceforward the Departamento team focused their activities on the interior instead of the capital of the country.

It is interesting to note that the academic profile and the political conception of those in charge of the Departamento has defined two basic features of environmental education since those early years:

- 1) an environmental education closely attached to the idea of social and political transformation as a constitutive element of its definition, despite having been created in the very heart of governmental offices, and
- 2) an ecologically oriented conception derived from the professional qualifications of the team together with instrumental government interests.

### *Interdisciplinarity Worked as a Signifier Providing a Horizon of Penitence: The Proyecto Interdisciplinario*

In 1985, the "Proyecto Interdisciplinario del Medio Ambiente para el Desarrollo Integrado" (Environmental Education Interdisciplinary Project for Integral Development) was developed by the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (National Polytechnic Institute). The discourse instituted by this project became another important source of signification within the Mexican environmental education field.

One of the most important features of the Proyecto Interdisciplinario was the idea of a dialogue between disciplines. This idea was fixed as an *imaginary*<sup>2</sup> that has organized the environmental education field in Mexico ever since. This certainly is so for the two Units of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional at the Azcapotzalco campus in Mexico City and the Mexicali campus in Baja California. On those campuses, the projects were led by academics

strongly attached to, and influenced by the Proyecto Interdisciplinario. The founder of environmental education studies at the Azcapotzalco Unit had been a former student in the Proyecto Interdisciplinario system; in an interview he acknowledged this influence was very important in his later performance at the university. At the Mexicali Unit, one of the creators of environmental education studies was a founder of the program of Proyecto Interdisciplinario and taught there before she got a position at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional in Mexicali. The idea of a dialogue between disciplines is thus one of the main traits of the environmental education curricula at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, and is strongly associated with the discursive presence of Proyecto Interdisciplinario.

In the Azcapotzalco and Mexicali discourses, it is possible to identify the traces of that foundational mark. In the case of Mexicali, those marks are present in the curricula; for instance, in the second semester in a course called "Methodology of Interdisciplinary Research," one finds this meaning in the established objectives:

To know the new methodological outlooks in order to construct the complex study subjects. To construct an interdisciplinary perspective concerning the methodological view. (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 1999, p. 5, translation by author)

Although in the actual process of professionalisation, this interdisciplinary dialogue has not been an effective and successful practice, the idea of interdisciplinarity works as a *nodal point* providing a "horizon of plenitude" to current and future environmental educators. Interdisciplinarity represents one of the attributes deemed necessary to becoming the "ideal environmental educator." In other words, the constitutive lack of the subject has acquired a form of presence through the signifier "interdisciplinarity."

### *A Hegemonic Practice: The Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Mexicali and Azcapotzalco Master's Programs*

The pioneers gathered at the Departamento later became leaders of a hegemonic group in the environmental education field in Mexico. Through steady work, they promoted the organization of an institutionalized network for the formation of a professional in this field. In the 90s, environmental education discourse, already begun during the 80s, was articulated around the ideas of "social transformation" and "interdisciplinarity." Additionally, a new signifier was added to the previous ones: an ethical concern for the environment. In this discourse, the signifiers "conservation," "naturalism," and "science as neutral" were excluded and constructed as *antagonistic* signifiers, that is to say, that they operated as limits to what had been defined as the environmental education discourse. In this sense, they marked what that discourse was *not*, as well as its impossibility of being a plentiful identity.

The *traces* of this discourse were present in the environmental education master's programs at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Mexicali and Azcapotzalco Schools. That presence was inscribed under several shapes:

- course content,
- seminar references, and
- academic events.

For instance, one can read in the general description of a second semester course called "Methodology of the Interdisciplinary Research" the following:

We will make a critical revision of the disciplinary science from its basis and tradition so as to reach to a discussion over the world collective projects conducting to the concepts of pluridiscipline, multidiscipline, interdiscipline [...] Every project will be examined critically, focusing on the hindrances that they face in the framework of a social and cultural structure dominated by competitive research styles. Furthermore, the necessary new values attached to this type of research and the problems that humankind has to face for constructing new utopias will be examined. (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 1993, p. 21, translation by author)

The discourse used by the pioneers of environmental education in Mexico was resignified in the two above-mentioned master's programs while keeping the signifiers of "interdiscipline," "social transformation," and "ethical concern" as *nodal points*.

### Multidimensionality of the Identification Process: Environmental Education and Identitary Dimensions

The environmental education field in Mexico involves a multiplicity of logics (often contradictory with each other), including epistemic configurations, actors, political, and ethical projects. Thus even though some hegemonic discourses can be recognized, at the same time there is a wide discursive proliferation, showing that those discourses are not "sedimented" enough to organize the identitary emergence of the field.

The International Program of Environmental Education (UNESCO, 1975) has been considered the most important international influence in the Mexican field of environmental education:

[With the] International program of Environmental Education, [the] industrialized countries and the international organizations officially fostered a way to conceive educational purposes, reaches and methodological approaches. This sedimentation imposes the schooling pre-eminence—implemented from a technological educational view—and the conservationist outlooks, which masked the asymmetric distribution and consumption of the planet resources and, therefore, the political dimension of educational projects. (González-Gaudiano, 1998, p. 19, translation by author)

The interpellatory capacity of those discourses, however, would decrease later. Social and epistemic conditions have also contributed to this decrease. On the one hand, in our contemporary social context the emergence of new social actors linked to a plurality of interests is expressed in a multiplicity of particular projects, making the possibility of a single interpellation to appeal to a wider group more difficult. On the other hand, the multiplication of actors' social-symbolic belongings (ENGO's, virtual nets, free time spaces, a diversity of struggles such as for Human Rights, Voluntary Pregnancy, the AIDS movement, etc.) implies actors' insertion in an array of social networks, thereby involving the expansion of social spaces of identification and thus demanding a different set of intellectual categories for analysis. In light of this, definition of an identity has become less clear and steady with the erasure of limits and the emergence of new kinds of contradictions as a part of contemporary social scenarios.

To approach the complexity of these scenarios, discourse analysis offers a *horizon of intelligibility* enabling the conceptualization of social practices as a permanent flux of meaning, within which processes and identities achieve just a partial structuring; they are constantly changing since they are the product of hegemonic *articulations* (Laclau 1990; see also, in the education field, Buenfil, 1998). Thus, the professionalization of environmental educators implies conceiving the identification process as a precarious, temporal, and contingent discursive articulation. Once we are on this ground of *undecidability* (Derrida 1989), we can read the professionalisation of environmental educators as a discourse attempting to interpellate students, that is, to provide them with images of identification, particularly the ideal image of the professional environmental caretaker. Each singular identification process can also be understood at a different discursive level, that is, as a discourse itself. This more particular discursive scale is an *overdetermined* system of meanings where the following trends can be distinguished:

- diverse social and cultural inscriptions of the subjects,
- decisions that define histories through the inclusion/exclusion of certain identification possibilities, and
- a permanent symbolic-imaginative game (Fuentes, 1999a, 1999b).

### Environmental Education and Identitary Dimensions: The Mexican Case

The identification process entails a high level of complexity; indeed, when one wants to construct a conceptual framework to understand this process, it becomes a necessary strategy to include several analytical approaches. In the research that nourishes this paper, the following dimensions were considered:

- political-ethical, and
- imaginary.

These analytical dimensions were developed from both field research that focused on the two master's programs and from theoretical writing.

### *Political-ethical Dimension*

This dimension explores the specific institutional conditions as the framework within which an environmental curriculum has been created and developed. The possibility of the subject's decision—thanks to the impossible fullness of the social (Laclau, 1990)—opens the very condition for the subject's emergence. The act of making a decision involves a political-ethical movement, that is, the inclusion/exclusion of some possibilities to emerge. Considering the identification process as a permanent symbolic game, the subject is constantly convoked by a multiplicity of discourses offering identification. The subject is successfully interpellated only when s/he accepts and includes models of this invitation to become in her/his self-definition by a previous moment of decision. It is important to stress, however, that this decision is not fully rational because of the constitutive incompleteness of the subject.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the subject has a constitutive impossibility to a complete performance of the symbolic mandate. It is necessary to state that this not fully accomplished achievement is the very condition for the success of any interpellation (Žizek, 1992).

In these terms, we can state that the political and politics are present in this discursive level, the former as the moment of decision and the latter as the identification model that is offered to the subject. A key aspect to be considered in environmental training concerns the ethical implications (i.e., awareness and responsibility) interlaced with the political definition of any program. There is an important concern about the kind of instituted values and how they can be contested. In the environmental program in the Mexicali case, this issue is focused on the idea of recovering the human being, i.e., self-reflection to face our alienated condition which is a product of fetishism and the reification process. This evokes a way to understand alienation as in the Marxist tradition of the 70s. Thus, this claim of recovering ourselves is connected with the very possibility of constructing a different kind of social relations.

The idea of thinking about an ethical dimension as a means of interpreting the identification process of environmental educators comes from the very identification model that is offered to the education subjects. This is the case in Mexicali's curriculum where one finds a humanistic view ordering both the meanings of environmental education and the profession itself. In the words of one of the leader's program:

We, in the environmental education program, are interested in transforming, knowing and transforming the human-being, but we need to know who is the human-being, not only to explain what the human is, but to say how we do explain the human. (Fuentes, 1999c, p. 23, translation by author)

explain the human. (Fuentes, 1999c, p. 23, translation by author)

One of the most important values around which environmental education has been defined in the framework of the programs explored is the respect for diversity involving the idea of cultural and social multiplicity.

*Researcher:* Tell me, the access to the communities, when you say “the communities next to the university”...

*Interviewee:* Look, normally it has happened that a teacher [environmental education student] who has already taken these studies asks us to bring the workshop to the community [...] The students themselves are those who established the link with the community. For instance, when a rural teacher who had taken a course at the university asked for help to organize a course for the indios [indigenous]. (Fuentes, 1998b, p. 21-22, translation by author)

In the master’s program held at Mexicali National Pedagogic University, the link with the community was thought to be a means of social transformation. There was a specific pedagogic strategy designed to accomplish this goal; its name was *promotoría* (promoting), and it involved the design of an environmental education course by the students, addressed to the community. The central point here was to spread a definition of environment that surpassed an ecological one and that defined it as a political-ethical signifier instead. That is, the notion of environment was no longer articulated from the idea of ecology, which did not disappear but in this new articulation remained subordinated to political-ethical concerns.

The traces of the environmental education field pioneers are present in this discourse. On the one hand, a socio-political definition of environmental education attached to the social transformation organizes the general profile of this program. On the other hand, a steady critique was developed of a narrow concept of environment which reduced it to an ecological definition. The presence of those traces were inscribed in different discursive forms:

- academic events where some of the pioneers of the field were invited,
- everyday teaching activities, definition of the contents and references of the program (some of the pioneers were asked to participate in special meetings to accomplish this task),
- permanent academic exchanges between the coordinators’ program, and
- presence of the pioneers.

### *The Imaginary Dimension: The Utopia and the Mythical Subject*

This dimension can be thought of as a condensation of the previous ones. Environmental education is a discourse articulated around a promise of a better future. It offers a promising horizon where the constitutive lack of the subject can be fulfilled. Thus environmental education is the *surface of*

*inscription* (Laclau, 1990) wherein the imaginary plenitude is embodied. This signifying operation can be read in the way in which environmental educators construct their presence in the field:

This mystique [...] crosses the environmental [and] regardless of how appropriate the program may be ... it changes people's perception of life [so that] they start to make sense of their lives. What sense? A sense of transcendence, of getting through the future generations. [...] If you ask the environmentalists why, they do not know but they start saying that their family relations have changed, that their ways to be related to people and their personal perception of the world have changed too. This makes sense in a historical moment in which we are flooded with despair and the sensation that whatever we do is pointless. [This is shared by] both those who defend deep ecology and the mystics. What is happening? What happens is a change in the sense of my life, now my life has a reason to be. It is necessary to save the human species, or the seals, or the whales or ... I am participating in [constructing] a nicer and more beautiful world, [where] we will breath better air. (Fuentes, 1998a, p. 10-11, translation by author).

Closely connected to the mystical role assigned to environmental education, one finds a variety of attributes operating as the identity traits that the environmental educator is supposed to have to be the "ideal" environmental educator. In the terms of one of the pioneers of this field, these attributes must be the following:

An environmental educator must be:

- Somebody that promotes a change ..., a change in the society ..., a change in the relationship between society and nature.
- Somebody who promotes resistance against globalization.
- The environmental educator must be someone knowing the biodiversity that we have.
- Someone having enough sensitiveness for working with the most unprotected people. (Fuentes, 1998c, p. 63)

This interpellation involves a convocation that is not just a symbolic offer but at the same time represents an imaginary completeness that supposes the possibility to deal with the social reality by concealing the constitutive lack of the subject (Zizek, 1992). The success of an interpellatory practice involves a complex meaning operation since the identification is supported by:

- a specific symbolic organization that is represented to the subject as symbolic images,
- some imaginary place of arrival (the subject constructs specific imaginary images which represent his possibility of fullness), and
- in an intertwined way with these dimensions, the singular psychic scenarios elaborated by each individual (the phantasms as psychic images constructed by the unconscious dimension of the subject) (Fuentes, 1999b).

Using a discourse analysis perspective, the emergence of the subject is possible thanks to the failure of the structure. Thus, any identity involves the steady attempt to conceal the radical impossibility of fullness through the constitution of a mythical subject. In those terms, the ideal offered to trainee environmental educators represents an imaginary possibility of fullness and at the same time shows the impossibility of an identity plenitude.

### An Environmental Educator's Identity as the Possibility of the Subject's Plenitude

The environmental education field in Mexico represents a discourse characterized by a constant flux of meaning. There is a "discursive proliferation" organized by "regional hegemonies." For the professionalizing institutionalized network, however, it is possible to find certain levels of discursive sedimentation. These are the cases of Universidad Pedagógica Nacional in Mexicali and Azcapotzalco, where two master programs have sedimented a set of discourses articulated around the signifiers of "interdiscipline," "social transformation," and "ethical concern."

I have argued that the discursive offers have been the result of hegemonic practice. They follow the *traces* of a group of pioneers that defined since the early 80s what environmental education had to be, including and excluding certain signifiers. Their discursive presence in the master programs was deployed through a set of practices such as participation in academic events, the inclusion of their books and articles as references for the seminars, and their influence in the definition of course content.

The identification process involves such a deep complexity and I have drawn two analytical dimensions to deal with it. First, the political-ethical one focuses on the decision of students enrolled in the above-mentioned master's program, a political game including and excluding certain possibilities of identification, which entails, at this discursive level, a hegemonic operation. In this context, an ethical dimension is also playing its role, with emphasis on values and the discourse of social transformation and the construction of a new social order. Second, the imaginary dimension is intertwined with the previous, and refers to the possibility of constructing a plentiful identity by means of a mythical operation. The impossibility of gaining a fully defined identity entails the necessity of creating a mythical subject, that is to say, the construction of a mythical identity where the possibility of a fully identity achievement could be reached. In conclusion, there is neither a Mexican environmental educators' nor an educators' identity as such. Rather, there are multiple possibilities for naturalization. Moreover, the identification process conceals the constitutive lack of the subject through a hegemonic operation entailing a horizon of plenitude.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Discourse is understood as a system of meanings whose organization is unstable, temporary, contingent and open, and resulting from hegemonic practices.
- <sup>2</sup> I draw on Laclau's (1990) concept of the imaginary as a logic structuring social reality by offering a horizon of plentiful and by concealing the fundamental void or emptiness around which any identity is structured.
- <sup>3</sup> This conception of the subject has been taken from the conceptualizations elaborated by Žižek (1992) and Laclau (1990) who take a Lacanian perspective. For both authors, the subject is not fully rational since the unconscious is constitutive of any subjectivity. That is, there is a permanent lack for which there is a permanent attempt to fill.

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## Notes on Contributor

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