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The research presented is the first part of a longitudinal study whose aim is to obtain a better understanding of students' academic behavior from the time they enroll at the university until the conclusion of their studies. In other words, during their academic trajectory. Based on demographic particulars and students' perceptions of their experiences in terms of factors known to affect academic performance, the current findings provide a profile of undergraduate students at an early stage of their studies in English Language Teaching Programs in public universities in Mexico. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 446 students at eight participating universities belonging to the states of Aguascalientes (UAA), Puebla (BUAP), Hidalgo (UAEH), the state of Mexico (UAEMEX), Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala (UAT), Colima (UCOL), and Veracruz (UV).

The questionnaire was constructed in keeping with the definition of *academic trajectory*, proposed by Cuevas (2001) in Fernández, Peña, and Vera (2006), as "... a set of factors and data that affect and account for the students' school behavior during their stay at the university. These factors can either be psychological and sociological (qualitative), or they can provide more precise data (quantitative) about students' academic performance." An analysis of the study's data reflecting the aforementioned factors reveals that there are more similarities than differences among the student cohorts, including a strong consensus that students are pleased with their BA programs.

The study's major findings suggest proposals for BA programs and university officials to consider in three broad areas. The recommendations respond to 1) students' interest and expectations about studying and working abroad; 2) students' neutral or mixed perceptions of tutorial programs vis-à-vis how well tutors respond to their academic and professional needs concerning, for example, the development of stress-management skills and good study habits, as well as what guidance they receive related to personal concerns such as relationship issues; and 3) students' views, evident in their perceptions of teachers' performance and other classroom realities, on the importance of supportive and meaningful learning environments. The researchers conclude that follow-up and interventionist steps are warranted to address students' needs and, by doing so, to respond to universities' concerns about improving the quality of tertiary education in Mexico.

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Mra. Bertha Guadalupe Paredes Zepeda
Dra. María Cruz Chong Barreiro

Studies of student trajectories
in language teaching programs in Mexico

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Studies of student trajectories in language teaching programs in Mexico

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(coordinadoras)



Universidad Veracruzana



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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESEARCH STUDY

*Octaviano García Robelo
Eleanor Occeña Gallardo*

Conceptual and Theoretical Definition of the Research

The study presented in this book brings into focus the educational trajectories of students in language-teaching programs in public universities in Mexico. The study traces a part of their history -- their academic experience, the realities they encounter, and the difficulties they face at an early stage of their university training. The research described in this volume is the initial step in what is hoped will be a longitudinal study of academic trajectories – a study of students’ paths from their matriculation as undergraduates to their graduation with BA degrees.

In the process of learning and growing personally and professionally during their time at the university, students may face challenges and predicaments that influence their educational trajectory. They encounter problems, for instance, that may lead them to abandon their studies in the initial semesters, or cause them to fail courses, or require them to delay their studies. The students’ goals may change along the way, but many persevere in their aim to successfully complete their university education and obtain a degree.

Drawing on this conceptual perspective, the objective of this book is to present the principal descriptive results of a research study of the school trajectories of students in language-teaching programs in eight state universities in Mexico.

Within the theoretical foundation of this research, *school trajectory* (also called academic or educational trajectory) is defined as the behavior of a particular group of

students in a specific time -- from the time they enroll at the university until the conclusion of their studies. A study of school trajectories takes into account the particulars of students' study paths and vocational plans. In addition, it examines the diverse circumstances that occur in university settings and in students' personal lives that affect their progress toward obtaining a degree and/or contribute to their withdrawing from or delaying their university studies. Any or all of these factors may come into play when students enter a university's multi-faceted learning environment that also includes facilities and support systems the university offers in the course of and as part of the educative process (Ponce de León, 2003).

In another explanation of students' academic paths, "school trajectory is understood as the set of factors and data that affect and make us aware of the school behaviour of the students during their stay in the university" (Cuevas, 2001, p. 145; in Fernández, Peña, and Vera, 2006). These factors may be psychological or sociological type (qualitative), or they may provide precise data on students' academic results or on the institution itself (quantitative). The analysis of these factors provides information that contributes to the design of action plans aimed at achieving (and supporting) students' successful academic trajectories in higher education.

Additionally, school trajectories may be defined by a number of determinant factors and situations that characterize each student as an individual. These involve students' personal characteristics, life-management skills, academic history and needs, socioeconomic conditions, the environment in which they grew up, and what educational and institutional opportunities they profit from during their time at the university.

School-trajectory studies refer to the quantification of the school behavior of a group of students (a cohort) as they function within an educational setting or school

establishment. The trajectory begins when students enter the university and continues throughout their stay, including when and if they exit (whether temporarily or permanently), and until they complete their academic credits and meet the administrative requirements of their study plans that allow them to graduate (Rodríguez, 1997). Studies of this type involve an analysis of a series of indicators that determine the academic behavior and performance of students as they move through an academic program. The studies also provide an institutional diagnosis that may identify strengths and weaknesses of the educational establishment and can serve as a point of reference for initiating strategies that address and even resolve the problems students face in higher education.

From this survey of definitions, it is evident that knowledge of the integrated elements that constitute school trajectory may become the basis for proposing actions to improve the quality of the educational services a university offers. At the same time, it is necessary to delimit the scope and the contribution a school-trajectory study may offer. Data on and information about every student can support programmatic and administrative decisions that contribute to improving the learning environment. However, it must be understood that studies of school trajectories are but one ingredient in a comprehensive system of investigation and evaluation universities undertake in search of meaningful resolutions to the challenges and problems they and students face. Although academic-trajectory studies constitute an important point of reference, contribute an information base, and include the possibility of preventive action, it is important to remember that such studies should be complemented with actions that allow and support efficient decision-making throughout the university community (ANUIES, 2001).

The multi-university study described in these pages was informed by and built upon the identification of a number of factors associated with the academic trajectory of

university students. The research addressed the following factors: the practice/performance of teachers; the BA program in which students are enrolled; the theoretical and practical knowledge of the courses in the program; the effects of external institutional and administrative aspects on students' academic performance; the effects of students' personal circumstances on their academic performance; students' beliefs and expectations related to their studies and their future; and the university's tutorial process. Students' perceptions of these factors were measured in a questionnaire, the study's research instrument (García and Barrón, 2011).

It is valuable to take a closer look at these factors, given that students' educational experiences are composites of many situations and conditions. Certainly, their academic performance is affected by the knowledge and behavior of their teachers within the teaching and learning process. The teacher's role is not limited to teaching; indeed, the teaching profession demands constant evolution on the part of its practitioners and what they know about their discipline and the science of learning (Latapi, 2003). Teachers must modify their practice to account for students' learning needs and the development of the teaching profession.

In recent years, studies of teachers and their praxis have come to define and/or describe teachers as guides and facilitators in the use of resources and the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, and skills. Some of the principal teaching competences considered necessary to promote self-learning in students (an inherent goal of education at any level) are based on knowing the students' personal characteristics and capacities, their potential for and difficulties with learning. These learner traits address psychological aspects such as motivation, maturity, personal interests, etc. Knowledge of these student characteristics affects teachers' abilities to determine learning styles, choose appropriate methods and

strategies to reinforce learning activities, guide students in the use of educational resources, lend support to students throughout the learning process, and extend learning beyond the classroom through the tutorial experience (Sola and Moreno, 2005).

In this sense, it is important to clarify that the work of a teacher must not be limited to the implementation of technical and pedagogical actions. It must adapt to the current educational context and include the pursuit of strategies enabling the progress and transformation of a society in constant change, a society that values active learning based on real experiences (Díaz-Barriga, 2010).

The scope of an educational program is another central element analyzed in this research study. An academic program, developed through selecting content and a means for delivering it while keeping an institution's objectives in mind, is conceived as a plan that regulates and manages a number of factors affecting the teaching and learning process. The set of interrelated concepts, proposals, and norms is structured to respond to an institution's need for organization (Arnaz, 1981; in Díaz-Barriga et al., 2010).

Further, Lavín and Farías (2003) do not separate the educational plans and programs from the continuous transformation higher education faces. The authors mention that a program's objectives are to procure the integral education of the student, by means of quality content and innovation, as well as the incorporation of support mechanisms such as tutoring, new models of learning, evaluation, accreditation, and certification.

Central to the analysis of any educational program is the academic performance of students in their school trajectories. Generally, and as alluded to earlier, students' academic performance is influenced by diverse psychological and personal aspects particular to each student's daily life, as well as their cognitive abilities, interests, motivations, previous academic experiences, etc. Similarly, academic performance, while it does not depend on

them, may be affected by external factors such as social and institutional realities that can have a repercussive effect on students' academic results. In other words, an institution's or a teacher's specific demands and requirements or the presence of a distinct social or family/home environment can impact students' performance (Celis, Osorno, Vallejo, and Mazadiego, 2010; Cruz and Quiñones, 2011).

Complementary to the above information, McKenzie and Schweitzer, from their research in higher education in Australia (2001), have classified four factors related to academic performance and identified a number of corresponding variables that further clarify them. The factors and variables are shown in Table 1 (García and Barrón, 2011, p. 98; based on McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001). These factors are of concern to institutions interested in the improvement of the academic situation of their students, which, it can be inferred, reflects on and/or explains the educational performance of the university system in general.

Table 1 Factors Related to the Academic Performance of University Students

| Factor | Variables |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Academic | grade point average obtained in senior high school; score on the university entrance exam; number of times a student attempted to abandon a program of study; GPA in the first year of university study |
| Psychosocial | integration of students in the university environment; level of students' anxiety; support networks for students; membership in a study group; students' commitment to their own goals and to the institution itself |
| Cognitive Appreciation | students' perception of their abilities and academic performance: negative and positive perceptions, level of academic esteem, perception of self-efficacy and stress levels |
| Demographics | age, parents' education, financial assistance |

Of the factors mentioned by McKenzie and Schweitzer, five classifications were retrieved for this study. The academic factors include students' final GPAs in high school and their GPAs at the end of the first year of university study; the demographic factors include age, parents' education level, and students' financial assistance. These aspects,

along with others which describe some of the external factors affecting students' academic trajectory, were addressed in Section A of the research questionnaire administered in the study.

Section B of the research questionnaire included attention to internal factors such as measuring students' psychosocial and cognitive appreciation and interpretation of their experience. They were asked for their perceptions of variables including the following: how integrated they felt in the university environment, what support networks were available to them, their commitment to the program and the university, their stress levels, and their abilities and academic performance. These internal factors relate to the teacher and the educational and psychopedagogical circumstances affecting students' experiences.

Students' expectations were another factor addressed by this research study. This factor is thought to produce distinctive effects in students and in their academic performance, even leading to unfavorable results, especially if students' situations and their expectations cause them to feel insecure. Such aspects may affect students' psychological state and their level of motivation if they occur frequently during their university studies (Andivia, 2009).

Because students' expectations do not exist in a vacuum, some authors (Scott, Kischner, and Murray, 2008) are of the opinion that the institution can intervene in significant ways through the interaction between the teacher and the student. The potentially negative effects of a mismatch between students' expectations and their academic realities can be redirected if good relationships between teachers and students are cultivated during the pursuit of learning. The expectations of students focus on what they look forward to and how they perceive the educational institution and the program of which they are a part. These will contribute to satisfying their personal and professional

perspectives which are, in a larger sense, perspectives related to the quality of higher education they receive and the process of teaching and learning they experience (Pichardo, García, De la Fuente, and Justicia, 2007).

The last factor in Section B of the research instrument related to the tutorial process in BA programs. Badillo (2007) refers to tutoring as an action that can have positive effects in the education of students in BA programs. He articulates that attending to students in a personalized manner favors their adaptation to the school environment, reinforces their cognitive and affective learning skills, addresses the development of their critical capacity and their social and personal development, and contributes to the improvement of educational outcomes as measured by lower rates of failure, delays and interruptions in academic trajectories, and drop-out figures.

Students working with their tutors is considered vital to the education of future professionals and researchers as it has great potential for reinvigorating knowledge, developing professional and personal competences, integrating collaborative networks, and guiding new leaders in the generation, innovation, and transfer of knowledge. However, the task of tutors is far from simple and not easily defined. In many cases, teachers assigned to be tutors lack fundamental theoretical knowledge and training in the tutorial process and, further, they lack the understanding and practical use of instruments that guide one's performance as a tutor. Consequently, tutors may base their actions vis-à-vis their tutees on their own beliefs and previous experiences, without benefit of continuing education and ongoing reflections of their know-how as both educator and tutor (De la Cruz, Díaz-Barriga, and Abreu, 2010).

The final ingredient of the theoretical framework for this multi-university research study is a single question. Section C of the research instrument consisted of an open-ended

query intended to gather students' *feelings* regarding their initial experience in their respective BA programs. This final portion of the questionnaire adopted a qualitative perspective concerned with understanding the respondents' unique perceptions of their trajectory during the initial stages of the program. In a sense, their reflections on and realizations of their place and performance in their academic program emerged through the discovery of "non-trivial facts and insights.... giving the respondents the opportunity to give their own views," as noted by Bell (2005). The inclusion of students' responses (their own words) was deemed a valuable addition to the knowledge and statistical information gathered in the previous sections of the questionnaire.

As a complement to the above discussion of the theoretical foundation for this research study, it is important to take note of the scientific investigations and international literature on factors influencing school trajectories. In Costa Rica, for instance, Garbazo (2007) compiled and analyzed research that showed possible factors associated with the academic performance of university students. His study, carried out in Spain, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Costa Rica, focused on determining variables, obstacles, and factors that affected student performance. These factors were grouped into three categories labeled *personal*, *institutional*, and *social*.

Another study of school trajectories was conducted in the science and technology programs at the Universidad de Quilmes in Argentina (Rembado, Ramírez, Viera, Ríos, and Wainmaier, 2009). In the first phase of the research, the objective was to identify and analyze students' perceptions during their first years of study at the university. In the qualitative study, the researchers compiled information using a discourse analysis of a written and individual survey in addition to student forums. Three dimensions of analysis were included, centering on the following: 1) factors associated with the teaching and

learning process; 2) factors associated with the institution; and 3) factors associated with conditions outside the university. The last of these was the most frequently cited factor in the results of the analysis, followed by students' difficulties related to their education at the high school level. Paradoxically and in relation to other research on school trajectories, economic factors were mentioned less often by the Argentinian students.

To conclude and review, a diverse body of national and international theoretical work has been done on school trajectories and the factors associated with student performance. The factors include teachers, the institution itself, students' economic circumstances, students' personal and cognitive characteristics, their expectations, and their tutoring experiences. These factors and their identified variables, in one way or another, in varied proportions, isolated or combined, are decisive to students' academic success or failure (García and Barrón, 2011).

In the next chapter, a discussion of the general methodology that guided the research documented in this book will highlight factors influencing school trajectories of students in BA language-teaching programs in eight public universities in the Mexican Republic.

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