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# What Do Institutions Teach for in Borderline Settings: Students' Views on Curricular Relevance in Elementary and Middle School Education?

Audin Aloiso Gamboa Suárez<sup>a1</sup> , William Rodrigo Avendaño Castro<sup>b</sup> ,  
César Augusto Hernández Suárez<sup>c</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Doctor in Educational Sciences. Research professor at the Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail: [audingamboa@ufps.edu.co](mailto:audingamboa@ufps.edu.co). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9755-6408>

<sup>b</sup> Doctor. in Social and Human Sciences. Research professor at Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail:

[williamavendano@ufps.edu.co](mailto:williamavendano@ufps.edu.co), Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7510-8222>

<sup>c</sup> Master in Mathematics Education. Research professor at Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail: [cesaraugusto@ufps.edu.co](mailto:cesaraugusto@ufps.edu.co). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7974-5560>

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### Abstract

This research article reports the findings of a study that sought to identify the opinion of students on the curricular relevance in elementary and secondary education in institutions located in Colombian and Venezuelan border contexts. The methodological approach is framed within the quantitative-descriptive paradigm. The conclusions of the study show that the relationship between curriculum, pedagogical practice, student, and context, does not exempt the responsibility assumed by the members of the educational community towards education but allows for generating spaces of agreement where the social and economic context is the most significant bulwark to define the sense through which education will be dynamized.

*Keywords:* Border Contexts, Curricular Relevance, Basic and Secondary Education.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail: [audingamboa@ufps.edu.co](mailto:audingamboa@ufps.edu.co)

## 1. Introduction

Talking about relevance in the current era refers us to what Roque et al. (2018) state as “[...] social responsibility of universities, attending to the levels of congruence, orientation, linkage and inherence of these in the solution of the needs and demands of the various social sectors, in anticipation of future scenarios” (p. 74). However, giving greater focus to relevance, from what it represents for education and from there, relevance for the curriculum will be addressed in the following lines (Ramírez et al., 2020; Gómez, 2020; Gamboa, 2016).

Let us start with the curriculum. This Latin word, whose meaning is a career, is for Iafrancesco (2004) “[...] what must be done to achieve something; what one must go through to reach an intended goal” (p. 15) and which will be present in terms of educational and teaching quality. 10 “anthropological, axiological, ethical-moral, formative, biological, psychological, social, spiritual, cognitive, aesthetic, scientific, epistemological, methodological, technological, technological, sociological, interactive, ecological, investigative, pedagogical, didactic, administrative and evaluative” (p. 10), from which this author bases the principles that guide an integral education that responds to the needs of the environment and [...] the means used to -from these principles-, achieve the integral education of students (Iafrancesco, 2004, p. 27); which is immersed in the curriculum.

The curriculum is commonly organized by competencies, projects, problems, or modules (Urquijo & Nãñez, 2020). Concerning the latter, it is understood that they allow a gradual, organized, coherent, pertinent and relevant structure and follow quality standards in the curriculum; concerning competencies, they can overcome the traditional education model, relying on modules (Correa, 2020).

Urquijo & Nãñez (2020), taking into account that pertinence is the affinity between the curriculum and the social and educational environments that surround it, point out that the pertinent curriculum is “[...] that which is congruent with social conditions and needs, with the norms that regulate social coexistence and with the concrete characteristics of learners in their diverse natural environment” (p. 127), which, according to other authors, can be related to two types of pertinence: internal and external. But such pertinence is absent when speaking of the coherence of the curriculum with the needs of the context, be it, in this case, Venezuelan or Colombian, since, for example, it is in the latter that the author just cited presents the case of a basic and middle school in Tolima, Colombia, whose institutional philosophy is dissonant with the proposed pedagogical model, there is a lack of knowledge of aspects of the curriculum by some teachers, whose guidelines are not updated and aligned with the components of the pedagogical project, where specific cases concerning depression, abuse, abandonment, separated parents, dysfunctional homes, etc., are reported., limit curricular relevance and where the constructivist pedagogical model perhaps borders on learning by competencies (Urquijo & Nãñez, 2020).

It also seems appropriate to speak of pertinence at other levels of education, such as higher education, so we will quote here a qualitative study on the subject for the reader to take into account. Well, when García (2002) speaks of the organization of knowledge and contents “[...] pertinent to the study, orientation, contribution and solution of the problems, demands and requirements of a society in its political-governmental, economic and social-community aspect” (p. 108), he is referring to a part of education. This author states at the beginning of his text that the curriculum relates the academic with the social, achieving an articulation between the theory built in the academy and the practice in the social; all from experience and with the support of various resources.

Finally, García (2002) proposes actions to improve curricular relevance in higher education, such as those related to the environment, representing the needs of diverse social actors, the demands and needs of the environment, etc., to the graduate profile, where he mentions, among others, the “[...] coherence, articulation and sequence of the different elements that make up the curriculum, such as the study of needs, profile, objectives, structure, strategies and evaluation” (p. 119); to the curricular structure, where he proposes integrating

[...] the blocks of basic general and professional training” (p. 120), etc.(García, 2002, p. 121); to the functions of the institution, such as teachers providing solutions to social problems; to curricular modernization, where the author mentions new technologies and more; to the study programs, where the evaluation will be seen as an integrated process with which critical responses are given and judgments are generated, for example, and to instructional strategies, among which we can appreciate a

very interesting one such as dramatizations and modeling to “Transmit attitudes and values (García, 2002, p. 121).

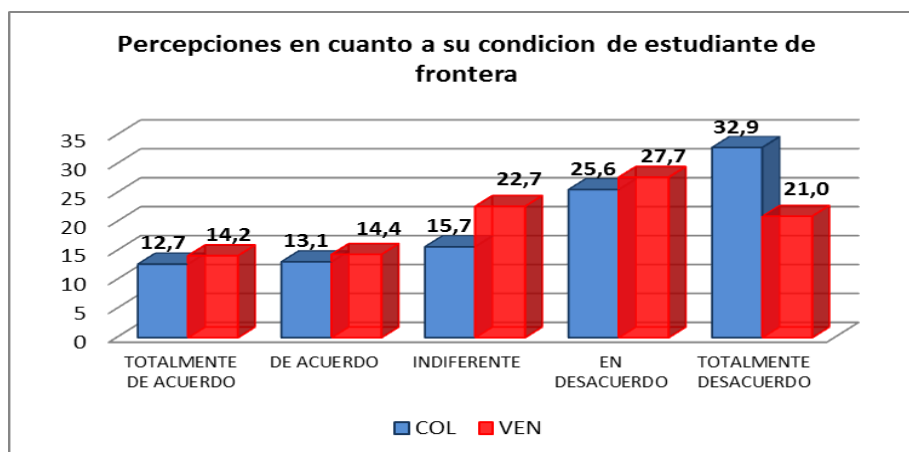
Mata (2015) also recognizes the “[...] need to specify and determine how appropriate a curriculum may be, in addition to its strengths and weaknesses for its execution or implementation” positioned from higher education, but clarifying that this can be applied to other levels of education. The contribution of this author, also leading us to external and internal pertinence, on what pertinence is, states that it is directed “[...] to the congruence of the design with the guidelines of the State, the consistency of the curricular components and the coherence of the design with the curricular action or practice” (p. 61). In the case of this study, for example, mathematics does not seem to have any relation or priority with the other curricular units, which postulates it to pertinence review within Venezuelan higher education (Mata, 2015).

## 2. Method

This research adopts a quantitative method at a descriptive level with a cross-sectional approach following a field design (Vanegas et al., 2022), given that the opinion of students linked to elementary and middle school educational institutions of two educational institutions in border contexts is collected. In this sense, descriptive studies seek to develop an image or faithful representation (description) of the phenomenon studied based on its characteristics. Describing, in this case, is synonymous with measuring. They measure variables or concepts to specify the important properties of communities, persons, groups or phenomena under analysis. The emphasis is on the independent study of each characteristic; it is possible that, in some way, the measurement of two or more characteristics may be integrated in order to determine how the phenomenon is or how it manifests itself; but at no time is it intended to establish the form of relationship between these characteristics. In some cases, the results can predict (Hernández et al., 2022).

For the collection of data, a questionnaire was applied in which a first section was considered associated with general aspects of the informants, such as age, and gender, among others; followed by a block of questions that the participants had to evaluate through a Likert scale identifying the level of frequency related to curricular relevance. The sample consisted of 723 students from the Venezuelan institution and 2587 students from the Colombian educational institution.

## 3. Results and discussion



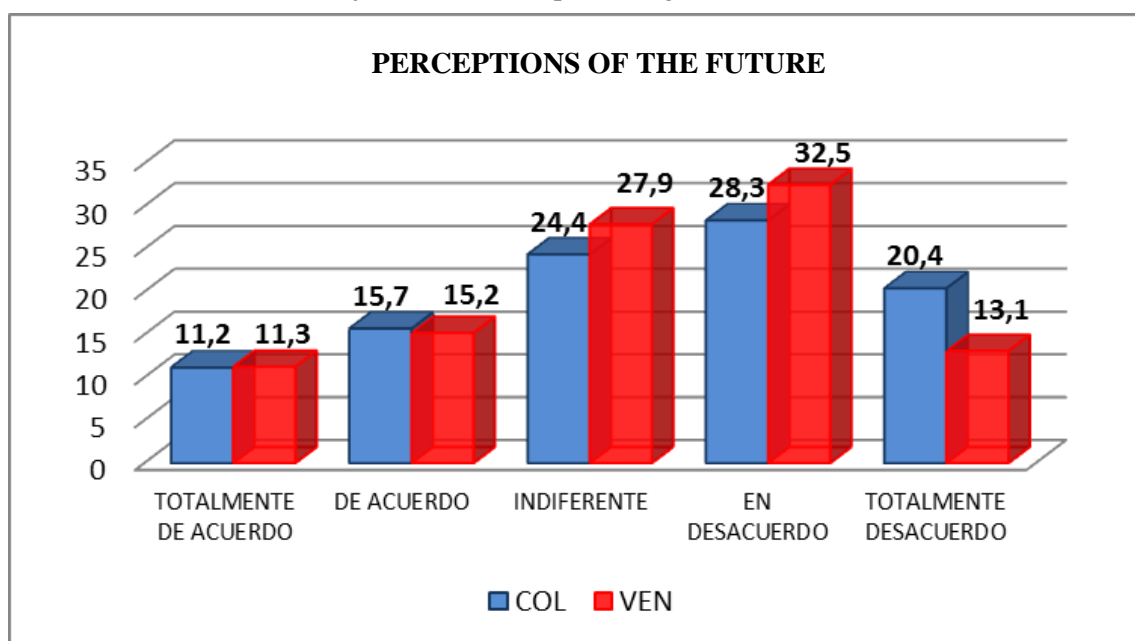
**Figure 1.** Perceptions of Colombian and Venezuelan students on the benefits of their border states.

In the data provided by the sample, 58% of the students of the Manuel Antonio Rueda Jara institution consider that being a student on the border does not offer great benefits in terms of quality of life or the possibilities of accessing the binational market, contrary to the general ideas, they show more attraction for other activities that do not have to do with trade. Therefore they see advantages to the border that presents them with a certain range of possibilities to achieve economic and social development from activities other than trade.

On the other hand, only 48.75 % of the students state that they have more advantages than other students from other areas of the country; however, most of them believe that being in a border area does not give

them the possibility of accessing the binational market nor achieve a better quality of life, although there is a commercial environment, they have other aspirations different from commerce; However, if there were the possibility of studying in Colombia, they would not accept; this is where the school acquires meaning, a school that responds to the expectations of its students based on the fact that society is changing and the daily dynamics are varied, as conceptualized by Arias-Valbuena et al. (2021) a school “as an institution, the school is located within different communities or human groups, which has the function of developing processes of instruction and dissemination of knowledge for the people who attend it” (p. 153).

The Venezuelan students perceive the border as a possibility to access places that allow them to expand their knowledge, have the facility to find a diversity of products, access to communications, to travel through some parts of the Colombian territory, thus making them stand out from other students from other areas of the country; however, their academic aspirations have nothing to do with the commercial environment of the border and they discard any possibility of studying in Colombia, which implies that the Institutional Educational Project is not developed taking into account the border environment.



**Figure 2.** Perception of Colombian and Venezuelan students on their prospects.

In this aspect, the perceptions held at the school level regarding the uncertainty of the future were reviewed. For 48% of those surveyed, belonging to the border is no guarantee of a secure future, especially when it is constantly observed that the economic dynamism of the border changes frequently depending on the moods of the central leaders of each country.

Not in vain and as shown above, 45.625% disagreed that being in a border zone increases job opportunities, that it increases the possibility of accessing higher education in Colombia, that it is possible to study in Venezuela and work in Colombia, and that it is guaranteed. Two countries, and those who opt for independence in curricular processes with a significant 18% showing indifference to the subject.

In sum, about 45% of respondents show interest in learning more about the social sciences in the neighboring country, taking into account that “the school takes on different meanings from the multiple cultural and social exchanges that happen there, and in turn, arise from common interests created as a result of socioeconomic conditions, generational or acquired cultural capita” (Arias-Valbuena et al., 2021, p. 156) through a flexible curriculum that enables their development options in either country, 2021, p. 156) through a flexible curriculum that makes possible their development options in either country, however, it can be noted that there is also a great deal of apathy to the idea.

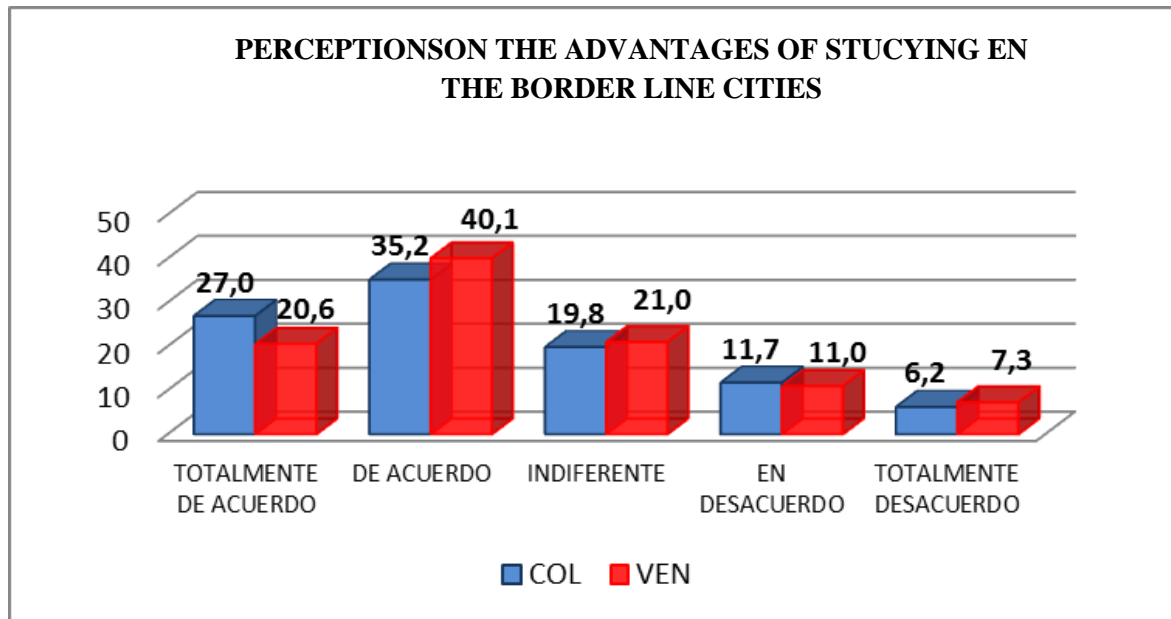


Figure 3. Advantages of studying at the border line cities.

In this category, it is important to recognize that 62% of those surveyed agree that studying in the border zone is advantageous for their interests, due to the multiple labor and economic development opportunities that it offers, despite the continuous conflicts that arise there, regardless of the legal considerations that arise in the development of such work. For this, it would be important to propose another rationality to contemporary challenges, seeking an educational practice based on social and human development budgets that contribute to environmental preservation and equity (Costa et al., 2015, p. 4).

Because of this, most of them agree that the border zone is a broad possibility to obtain economic resources, not only considering legal activities but also illegal activities that are typical of the border zone, all of them aimed at acquiring in the shortest time possible some economic resources that will allow them a social and work position that will provide them with sustenance and personal development.

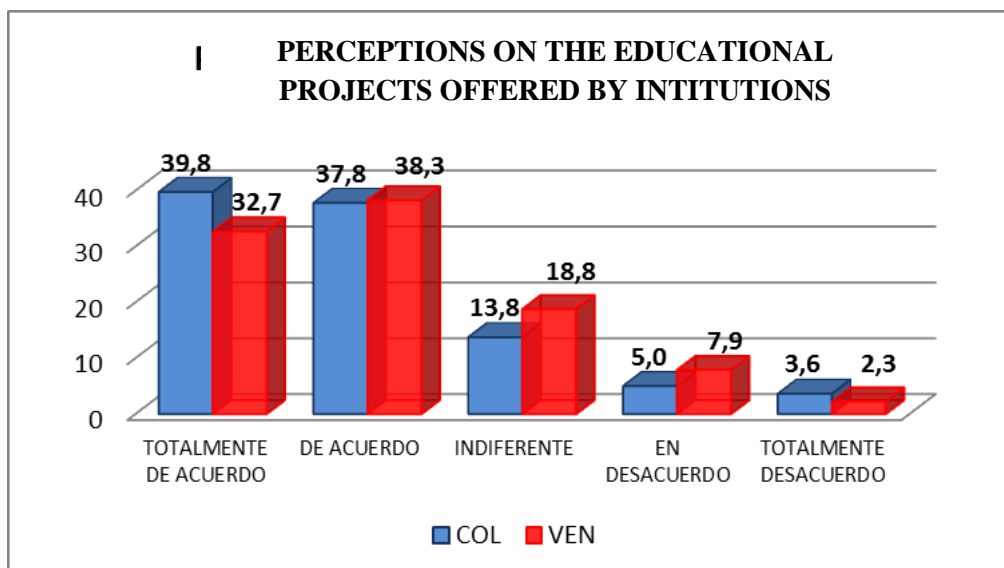
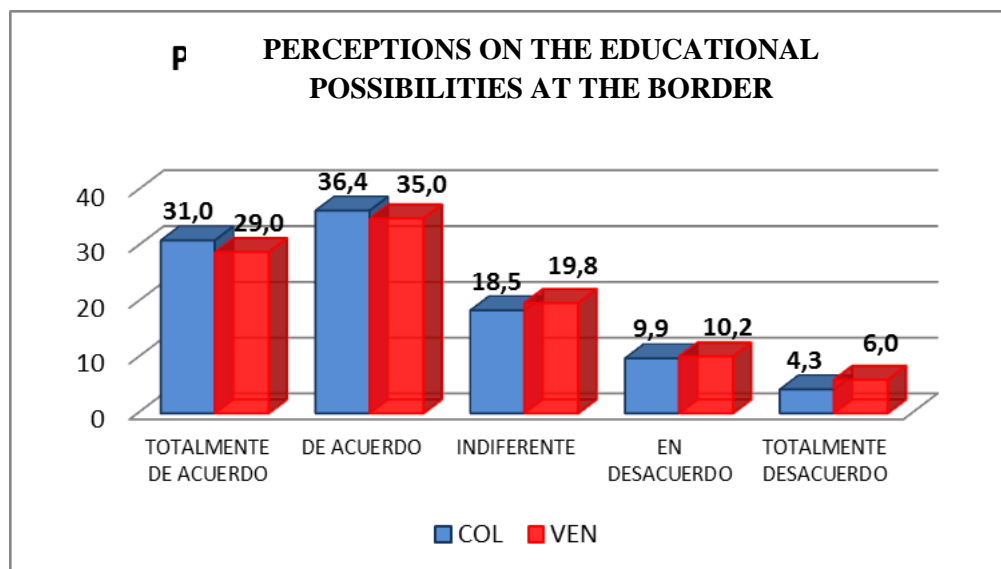


Figure 4. Relevant educational projects.

The educational projects in the IE have a direct echo in the school reality. For 78% of the students, the institution offers quality educational projects oriented to comprehensive training, understanding then,

the nature of the educational work, the diversity of actors involved and the multiplicity of factors that affect the quality (Montes & Gamboa, 2018, p. 242) influencing with great emphasis on labor competencies that allow students to integrate promptly and without trauma to the productive field, with projection to professional training in universities both in Colombia and Venezuela.

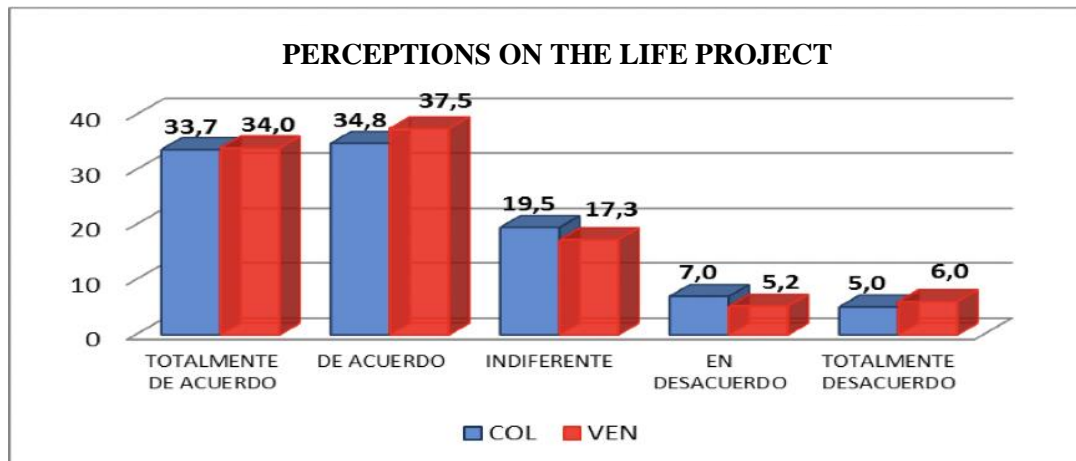
Thus, most students agree with the institutional and educational projects in terms of the future academic and labor vision implicit in their application in the border area, providing fundamental elements for the development of future university professionals and workers in the border area.



**Figure 5.** Educational opportunities in the border zone.

One of the most significant aspects of the sample emphasized the possibilities that exist at the educational level in the border zone. In that order of ideas, 67% of the students agree that the pedagogical processes of the various secondary education institutions should present articulation projects with technical and professional institutions that facilitate the transition of students from secondary to higher education without trauma, especially in programs related to the commercial development of the region, This, together with job skills and entrepreneurship, will allow the region to achieve sustainable development that improves the quality of life of its inhabitants, which can be addressed “through the development of specific didactic-pedagogical projects that consider the concerns that students bring to the world of work and life in society” (Costa et al., 2015, p. 10).

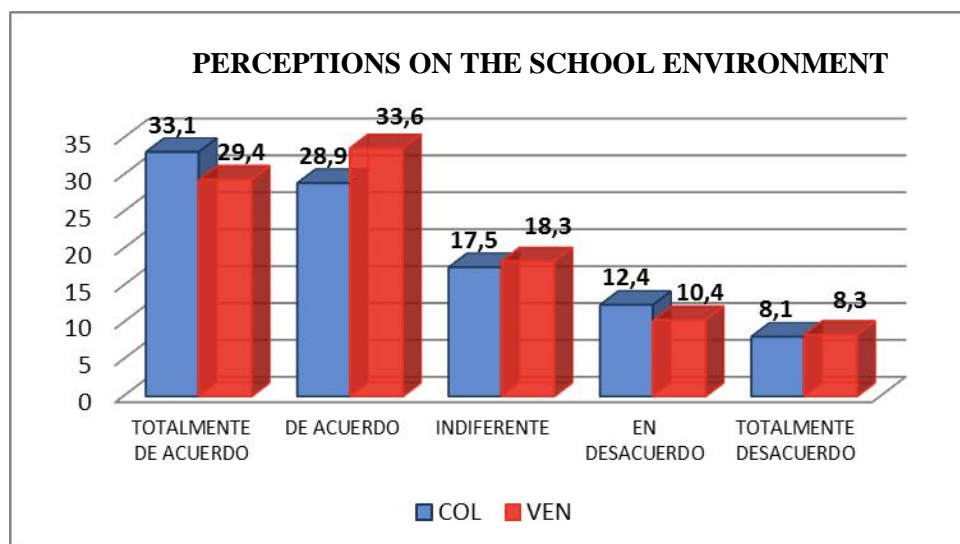
Most of those surveyed consider it fundamental for border institutions to offer various agreements that allow them to complement the educational process in other institutions with greater capacity and experience, facilitating future entry into these institutions.



**Figure 6.** Perceptions of Colombian and Venezuelan students regarding their life projects.

Another important aspect for the students is their projection for the coming years and how their formative processes help them outline their professional field. It was observed that 69% of the students consider that the institution offers continuous guidance for the elaboration of the life project and continuously supports its execution, thus projecting the institutional objectives to each student's future and the region's future development.

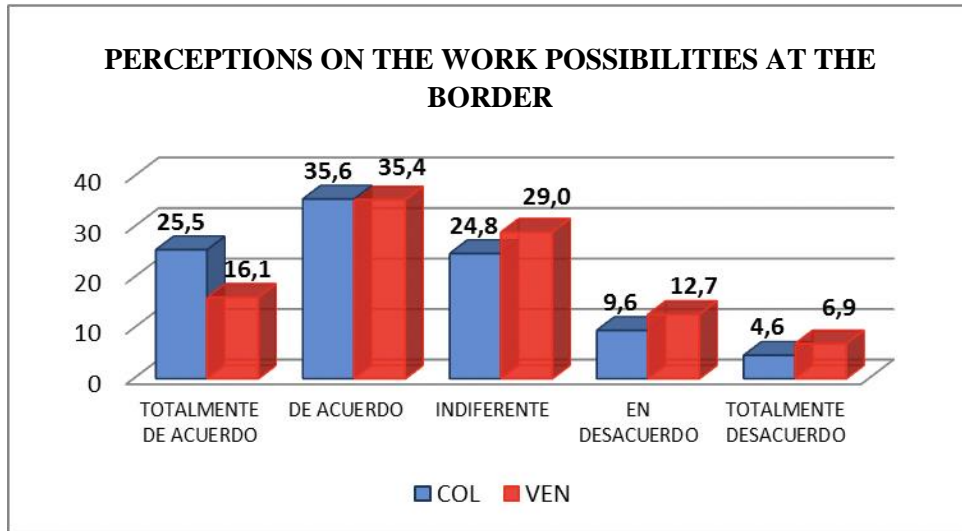
It is necessary to highlight that the formulation of a life project is a crucial point for the future and this is considered by 72% of the respondents, indicating that the guidance and accompaniment by the institution are fundamental for a better projection of the same so it must be the protagonist in the school curriculum. In this sense, as stated by Castillo et al. (2018), "The teaching process that takes into account the freedoms of individuals, that is framed in the reality of the context and in which students and teachers are built, focused on common objectives of collective and dynamic transformation" (p. 107).



**Figure 7.** Perceptions of Colombian and Venezuelan students regarding school environment.

A marked tendency on the part of the participants was their perception of the school environment, which can be very heterogeneous and complex to analyze. However, within the sample, it was possible to see that for 62% of the Colombian students, the institution offers a school environment that favors integral development providing a good balance in the policies that favor training for work and the stimulus to be a good member of society, for 63% of the Venezuelan students surveyed, a good school environment is important since it provides them with social contact that stimulates values. However, the large

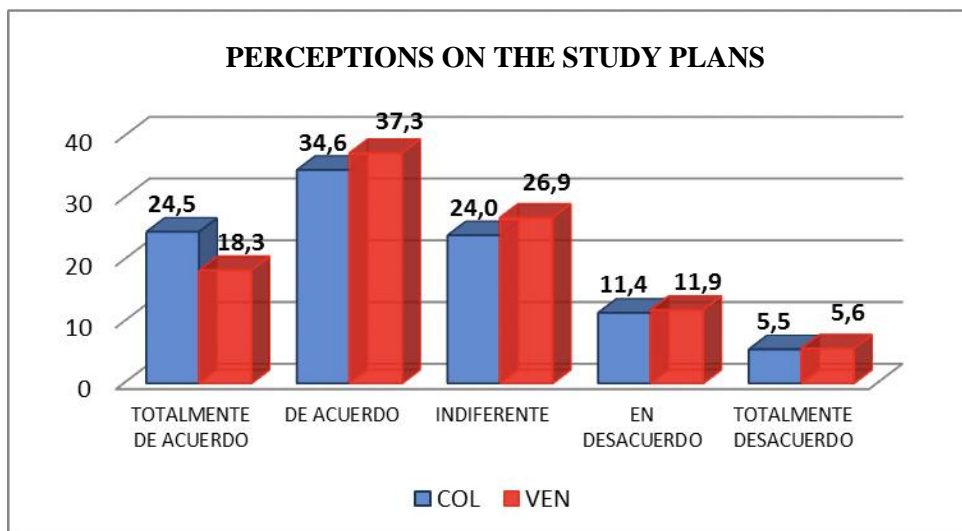
percentage of those indifferent to the item is worrying because they show a lack of interest in it, which implies that “the focus of attention should not be on verifying whether or not the different cultures are considered equivalent, but on the manifestations of power and control that have been determined in the so-called dominant cultures over the others” (Muñoz et al., 2012, p. 54)



**Figure 8.** Perceptions of Colombian and Venezuelan students regarding employment opportunities in the border zone.

For a high percentage of Colombian students, employment opportunities in the border area are greatly favored by the wide range of possibilities offered to achieve personal and professional fulfillment in the field of commerce, as well as in the possibilities for professional development in higher education institutions, not only in the country but also in Venezuela.

In Venezuela, only 51% agree in considering that the general orientation of the school curriculum should be towards commerce; it is notorious that 49% do not agree with this appreciation since they consider that the future field of labor action has nothing to do with economic aspects of the region, in this sense, one cannot neglect “the eagerness to improve opportunities for access to the labor market made neglect the need for students to have high knowledge about society, culture and politics” (Muñoz et al., 2012, p. 54).



**Figure 9.** Perceptions of Colombian and Venezuelan students regarding curricula.



In curricular terms, 60% of the Colombian students surveyed consider that the curriculum of the institution is designed in such a way that it favors the comprehensive training of students, guiding in a basic way the labor processes and commercial entrepreneurship as starting points for the development of activities related to commerce in later stages of secondary education. Furthermore, Bolívar (2019) states that the quality of education is directly related to the quality of teacher training, hence the belief that the more and better the training, the better the quality of education (p. 11).

55% of the Venezuelan students surveyed believe that the study plans are well geared to the needs of the region and the interests of the students, but it is notorious the high percentage of those indifferent or opposed to the subject, reaching 45%, who consider that they should only follow the plans drawn up without asking questions or questioning them.

#### 4. Conclusions

A fundamental aspect regarding the relevance of pedagogical work to take into account is the commitment assumed by the teacher to respond to the interests and needs of students, “Teachers are committed to research in their fields of work and the classroom, in order to train individuals who, in turn, can continue to build knowledge beyond the boundaries of the school” (Gamboa-Suárez et al., 2016, p. 65). Such commitment is determined by understanding the social context in which students live, so such perception affects the understanding of the universe of needs that schoolchildren go through. In this sense, cross-border education significantly impacts school education since it marks learning rhythms, recognition of the school space, thinking routines, design of pedagogical strategies, and a wide range of scenarios that affect the teaching-learning processes. Likewise, the contextual sense has repercussions on recognizing the students’ interests within their formative process, which can vary depending on the space of origin. Thus, teachers have the task of transforming their pedagogical work into a sociological research scenario that allows them to understand the dynamics in which their students live and how, from this recognition, continuous pedagogical improvement processes are established.

Regarding the purpose of teaching, it cannot be ignored that in teaching are implicit the interests and realities of the subjects who learn, that is, “the need for any educational policy to understand the real context in which it will be developed and the actors involved in its implementation” (Montes & Gamboa, 2018, p. 232), or what is the same: the school reality, its evolution and each of the successes and failures that can be made in it, have a significant impact on the qualification of the pedagogical process. Even so, teachers are called to contribute epistemically in observing the school process, from research proposals that take the school context and re-signify the educational scenario. Such changes are only possible if a conjunction between disciplinary knowledge, research and the reality of the classroom is used. Only then is it possible to ratify how the relationship between school and context should be structured, which, in the case of border teaching processes, broadens the view of the daily problems of the students’ subsistence.

According to the above, and following the postulates of Gamboa-Suárez et al. (2016), the diverse social realities demand that the curricular process be adjusted so that the students are the ones who make decisions about conceptions, theories, methods, processes and research instruments, not only in the conceptual field but also from the social field (p. 63). There it is possible to understand that the role of the teacher is not a matter of the possession of knowledge but a binding actor between the socio-cultural context of the students and the possibilities offered by each of the disciplines taught in the educational centers. Because of this, it is worth analyzing that the curricular formulation and structuring of the IEPs respond to distancing the contextual systematically since the same integrative projects that emerge within the courses can be paid for. Even so, this view should not be ratified but demands a constant contemplative scenario on the part of teachers who have the challenge of re-signifying and innovating their pedagogical practices in the face of a dynamic and changing context developed in their classrooms.

Finally, the relationship between curriculum, pedagogical practice, student and context does not exempt the responsibility assumed by the members of the educational community toward education. However, it allows the generation of spaces for consultation in which the social and economic context is the most significant bulwark to define the meaning through which education will be energized. This, in the case of the educational centers with interference in the border areas, has a significant impact on the

curriculum redesign according to the needs, challenges and adjustments relevant when talking about education at a general level and from the teacher's role and pedagogical practice in particular. There it will be understood that the intercultural interaction between the school and the context of the students at the elementary and middle school level allows the tracing of pertinent routes of improvement of the school reality of this time.

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