

**APPROACHING THE CONCEPTS OF “EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT”
AND “BEST PRACTICE”: DELPHI METHODOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR
BUILDING CONSENSUS ¹**

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Abstract

This article presents the results of applying the Delphi technique to build a consensus around the concepts of “educational achievement” and “best practice” in compulsory education. After defining our key informants, including different groups of educational agents (teachers, families, students, academics and experts), we developed two different questionnaires, the first one aimed to gather the informants’ opinions and the second one, developed on the basis of the results of the first one, trying to reach the desired degree of consensus. Two rounds of consultation were enough to allow us to indicate tendencies and points of debate regarding what we mean by educational achievement and best school practice.

Key words

Educational achievement, Best school practice, Delphi technique

This work is part of a I+D research project titled “Cultural Diversity of Students and School Efficacy; A Repertory of Best Practices in Compulsory Education Centers”. The idea that the project is based on is that education, especially in the compulsory stage, should pay attention to students’ cultural differences and try to reach essential educational objectives, such as equal opportunity to access socioeducational goods and resources, for all students. Our objective is to contribute to improving the school by preparing and disseminating a repertory of best practices developed in the compulsory levels of Spanish educational centers.

Therefore, we propose a review of the concept of «best schooling practice» and the notion of students’ educational achievements. Building on this initial review, the school practices that have proven to be effective in achieving good educational results for students will be identified and examples will be given, in order to describe them and present a repertory of best practices that can be used by teachers and people in charge of education.

In previous studies by our work group, studies also related to cultural diversity and student achievement, we started out using our own views: what we considered to be achievement and best practice. From our point of view, the educational achievements we considered valuable had to do with school results and communicational competence. Similarly, we identified different dimensions of educational practice related to the context and the process of teaching-learning, such as: previous school experience, family context, school center and classroom organization, teaching style, methodology in the classroom, resources, diagnostics, and evaluation, among others (Aguado and others, 1999, Aguado, T., 2007).

The results obtained led us to wonder to what extent talking about these achievements and practices was valid without taking into account the opinion of the people involved in the educational process. Perhaps what we defended from our more theoretical framework might be too rigid, losing the viewpoint and perspective of everyday experience. Can we talk about achievements starting out from a previous definition or should we talk about achievements in each specific context?

Theoretical Framework

The research project exists within the general framework of *School Effectiveness Improvement* (SEI), a theoretical-practical movement that attempts to find out how schools can carry out satisfactory processes of change that increase all students' development by optimizing teaching and learning processes and the center's organizational structures, in order to apply this knowledge to real improvement in the school (Gray, et al. 1999). At the same time, it is part of the studies on cultural diversity and education, specifically within the Intercultural Education Approach, which intends to attend to students' cultural diversity by means of global changes that affect all the school agents and dimensions, in order to achieve equal opportunity/equal results and the development of intercultural competency.

The perspective that is called "intercultural" in the European context is considered to be the proper formula for responding to the educational needs of students and culturally diverse communities. This approach has four basic principles (Bennett, 2001, Aguado 2003). First, the focus is on culture, and diversity is considered normal. Second, it holds ideals of social justice and considers that the different forms of discrimination and prejudice should be eliminated. Third, it proposes cultural exchange and construction in all teaching and learning processes. And fourth, it understands educational excellence and quality as the achievement of better results for all students.

The "School Effectiveness Improvement" movement intends to find out how a school can carry out satisfactory processes of change that will increase the development of all the students by optimizing the teaching and learning processes and the organizational structures of the center, applying this knowledge to really improving the school. It shows "where to go and how to get there" with an eminently practical objective: to

help teaching centers to change in order to achieve their educational objectives more effectively.

The School Effectiveness Improvement movement pursues the objective of encouraging students' specific achievements because success in educational practices is students' progress in academic, personal, and social areas, more than in innovation itself. That is, the main indicator of a school's improvement is related to students' achievements, not to teaching practices or to the curriculum or management of the center, which are only significant in relation to the main objective. This idea means that teaching must be contextualized, considering the different elements and dimensions of the real community; it means that the teaching-learning process must be adapted to the students in each center, not the other way around. For intercultural education, the school should be the educational scenario where the students develop their full learning potential and thus achieve equal opportunities to carry out different roles in society.

In a learning context, educational achievements become learning processes for students and also for teachers. In this way, the components that refer to the results in the School Effectiveness Improvement programs correspond to two kinds of objectives: students' achievements, which constitute the criterion of efficacy, and the intermediate products of the change process, which refer to the criterion of improvement. However, these programs will only be successful if they develop in terms of equity (all the students must benefit equally) and if they take added value into account (if they take the initial context and each student's record into account when they consider the results) (Murillo, 2002).

For intercultural education, both students and teachers should reflect on their own identity and on respecting the ways other people express themselves. This all requires learning achievements related to self-knowledge and communication with others. Educational achievement involves acquiring competencies: competencies for managing knowledge, for professional development, for coexistence, and for self-knowledge and emotional adjustment. The school educational achievements that should be reached are also related to developing intercultural competencies in teachers and students. Intercultural competencies are the cognitive, affective, and practical

skills necessary for getting along effectively in an intercultural medium. They are oriented toward creating an educational environment where people feel accepted and supported by their own skills and contributions, as well as permitting effective and fair interaction among all the members of the group (Aguado, 2003).

From this perspective, the notion of “best practices” refers to the actions that lead to achieving the objectives proposed, considering the specific context. In our case, we will talk about best school practices in contexts of cultural diversity, so we will consider these best school practices to be any educational actions that lead to achieving valuable objectives in all students and that also fulfill a series of requirements from the intercultural approach.

Delphi methodology: the objective and the context of application

As Ballester and Oliver (1999) indicate, this technique is specifically meant to resolve the difficulties that arise in social research contexts, where it is necessary for different social agents to participate in the processes in order to achieve a high level of efficacy and quality products and processes.

The Delphi technique is defined as a group process that uses written responses to obtain the group’s opinion on a certain issue by means of successive surveys (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1984; Witkin and Altschuld, 1995). The following features characterize it:

- The technique is based on a nominal group formed expressly to gather specific information. The participants do not know one another nor do they interact directly during the information-gathering process, allowing a more personal intervention and avoiding the possible influence of dominant opinions (Pineault and Daveluy, 1987).
- The Delphi technique uses a questionnaire as the instrument for gathering participants’ opinions.
- The technique is carried out in different rounds. It is a repetitive process, where the information is considered more profoundly and with more nuances in specific

questionnaires used in each round of application, in order to arrive at a consensual position on the subject being studied.

- The participants are considered to be informants on the subject. By informant, we mean a person whose opinion is valued for both her knowledge and her concrete experience. Because of this, we prefer to use the term “key informant,” suggested by Ballester and Oliver, 1999, thus avoiding the academic connotation that frequently accompanies the role of “informant.”

Carrying out the Delphi technique in our research meant gathering information in two rounds. We began the first round with an open questionnaire in which we asked about the concept of achievement and best practice. The responses became the basis for constructing a second questionnaire in which we attempted to study consensus and discrepancy in the group’s opinions.

Both the construction of the instrument and the selection of informants are phases that were carried out in parallel in our study. We had a clear idea of what kind of informants they were going to be: professionals in education who work, preferably, in the academic sphere (theoretical) and in the technical sphere, together with professionals and other people involved in education in general, whose link to education has a more practical, experience-based nature. The following table gives more detailed information on the profiles of the 65 informants selected.

Specialists:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 participants with a great deal of theoretical knowledge about cultural diversity and education • 5 technical specialists from regional administrations in charge of programs of innovation, improvement, and cultural diversity. • 5 consultants in Teacher Centers
People involved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 members of management teams in primary and secondary education • 15 teachers in primary and secondary school. 7 involved in cultural diversity projects and 7 not involved in any project but motivated by the subject of attention to diversity. • 5 members of families with school-age children • 6 primary and secondary school students • 3 representatives of the Parents’ Association • 7 members of non-profit associations

Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 participants selected not because of their connection with the subject but for their capacity to synthesize, justify, and comprehend the dimension and repercussions of the research problem.
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Table 1. Informant profiles

The objective of the questionnaire of the first round was to gather opinions about the two main issues to be studied in an open fashion:

- What do we mean by **best schooling practices**?
- What do we mean by **educational achievement** in school?

Taking into account the variety of our group of informants, which also includes student participants, we considered it a good idea to derive more specific questions in relation to these two thematic axes, as well as to adapt the language used to the “adult version” and the “student version.” This resulted in two parallel questionnaires, the contents of which are synthesized in the following table:

<i>Questionnaire for researchers, teaching staff, families, CPR/CEP consultants, members of associations</i>	<i>Questionnaire for students</i>
1. What is educational achievement in compulsory education?	
2. Identify educational achievements that are usually attained in compulsory education.	1. Write a list of things that are usually achieved at school/the institute.
3. Mention educational achievements that should be attained in compulsory education.	2. Now think about what good things should be achieved at school or at the institute.
4. What aspects require more work in order to attain these achievements in compulsory education?	3. What aspects should be worked on in school or in the institute in order to achieve the good things you mentioned in Question 2? By the way, the good things you mentioned in Question 2 are considered to be “educational achievements.”
5. What is “best schooling practice”?	4. What activities or situations in the school/the institute do you think are good for accomplishing these achievements?
6. What does carrying out “best schooling practice” involve for a center and its teaching	

team?	
7. Identify “key points” that facilitate the attainment of educational achievements in a school center.	5. What aspects of school or the institute are the most important for accomplishing these achievements?
8. Identify “dark points” that limit the attainment of educational achievements in a school center.	6. What aspects of school or the institute are the ones that do not make it easy to accomplish these achievements?
9. List, from most important to least important, some aspects that have always concerned you regarding “schooling practices” and their relation to “educational achievements.”	

Table 2: Questions included in the questionnaires

The analysis of the responses to the first questionnaire allowed us to identify common positions together with the less consensual reasonings regarding our two basic study issues. These results served as a basis for preparing a second questionnaire, a closed one this time, which made it possible for us to study the joint vision of our informants on achievement and best practice.

Two rounds of consultation were enough to reach the desired degree of consensus among informants’ opinions. The analysis of the answers to both questionnaires allows us to indicate tendencies and points of debate in the information gathered for each specific question.

What do we mean by educational achievement?

There is consensus when the informants define achievement and refer to attaining a *previously proposed goal or objective (75% consensus)*.

Accomplishing each of the objectives proposed in the compulsory education curriculum is an educational achievement.

Nevertheless, we find opinions that refer to achievement that emphasize the results obtained *even though* there is not necessarily any planning, or *previously manifested intention, (75% consensus)*.

...in compulsory education we mean what has been achieved, what has been accomplished. What we have achieved that we had previously (implicitly or explicitly) programmed, organized, and adjusted time-wise.

Another basic aspect refers to responsibility for defining the achievements. 60% of the people surveyed believe that this task should be shared by the entire educational community, compared to 10% who feel that it corresponds exclusively to the teaching team. In general, in the analysis by participant profile there is a high consensus in considering that the entire educational community shares responsibility for defining goals and objectives; we can highlight the group of “theoreticians” and “social agents” who express the strongest disagreement with teachers taking this task over.

Secondly, when the informants define achievement, they distinguish among different *referents*: from the point of view of the students, the classroom (teacher-student), and, finally, referring to the political-structural level.

We could distinguish among different levels of educational achievement: for the pupil, for the group/room, or for the school as such.

But for the majority of the informants, in general terms, when they talk about what usually happens in a classroom, they point to *the students* as the main referent for educational achievement, more than the institution or the other agents involved, (52% consensus).

I imagine that, when you talk about educational achievement, you talk about objectives attained by the students (exclusively).

Some opinions contributed by another minority sector of participants contrast with the previous ones:

I think that educational achievement in compulsory education can only be considered as such if it affects, considers, or “includes” all those involved, not just one part of them.

I also think that an achievement is not limited to one single sphere, but can be linked to all the spheres that make up school life.

This apparent contradiction can be explained if we consider the position from which the informants speak: whether they are talking about what they desire or about what they perceive to be common practice. That is, in everyday reality, the informants recognize the way achievements are perceived for and by the students, and this is related with the way how they programme, plan, and acknowledge them, avoiding the rest of the educational agents, even though they recognize or consider the need to see educational achievements with reference to the entire school community as an objective.

Thirdly, and building on the previous consensus in which the referent for educational achievement for the majority of informants is the student, achievement refers to the **acquisition** not only of conceptual knowledge but also of procedural and attitudinal knowledge. In addition, they refer to the acquisition of values and attitudes that allow the subject to participate socially. That is, we find a consensus that refers to educational achievement as the integral development of the person.

For me, educational achievement means accomplishing a basic educational objective in compulsory education, something that allows any student to have the basic strategies, knowledge, and attitudes to participate in equal conditions in the social context in which he develops.

Nevertheless, when they are asked about the achievements that are usually attained in compulsory education, a lot of the responses coincide in referring to learning *curricular knowledge*. Procedural or attitudinal competences are highlighted as achievements that *should* be attained.

There continues to be too much insistence on merely conceptual knowledge aspects, leaving procedural and attitudinal aspects as accessory aspects.

Similarly, following the focus of *how things should be*, we must point out the following achievements as the most frequent opinions: autonomy (in learning, in

decision-making...), critical capacity (reinterpretation, capacity to read critically, critical attitude toward problematic social situations...), socialization and coexistence (equality, tolerance, empathy, respect, solidarity...):

Getting them to be autonomous and have personal initiative for building new knowledge.

That the students learn to be critical, and to take the initiative in a responsible way.

That the students learn to be participative, democratic, and group members.

These achievements are considered from the process and product point of view (95% consensus). Only two of the informants, a secondary school teacher and an informant who was selected as a theoretician, indicated that they did not agree with this opinion. Here is the explanation that the first informant gave, emphasizing the process independently of the result obtained.

I agree that the process is a lot more important than the product, because these processes do not necessarily lead to the same product, and that is where the richness of education should be, in being able to see the different points of view that people contribute.

The responses gathered in relation to the achievements attained by the centers point out that the centers manage to promote and maintain relations among the students (73% consensus), but not among the different families (82%), or among these families and the educational center (64.1%). 64% of the participants, on the other hand, believe that the centers have not yet reached a high enough level of respect for and acceptance of diversity.

The statements about achievements in relation to the teaching staff are quite pessimistic. The participants believe that the teaching staff has not attained educational achievements such as: sensitivity to diversity (57% believe the teaching staff are not sensitive to diversity), professionalism of the teachers (67% say there is none), or

motivating the students to learn (85% think that the teaching staff has not achieved this).

Regarding the families and the community, 87% of the informants consider it an educational achievement when the centers are capable of detecting social problems in the family apart from those related to a student's learning.

Achievements imply improvement. And this improvement has a personal character; each student improves from his starting point. It does not imply the existence of generic minimums that must be reached by all students at the same time.

Educational achievement in compulsory education can cover anything from a student attaining the curricular objectives proposed, to being a sufficiently approachable and understanding person with whom the student can establish an agreeable, cordial link at any time. Any small accomplishment in this regard, with a difficult student, can be an achievement for the teacher.

Finally, we have asked our informants which aspects need more work in order to attain educational achievements. The level of agreement regarding each of these aspects is shown below:

1. Autonomy of the centers (92.5%)
2. Reconceptualization of the centers: open, diverse, inclusive, integrating, respectful centers (92.5%)
3. Strategies to promote students' participation in class (95%)
4. Student involvement in learning (97.5%)
5. Promoting ongoing training and recycling for teaching staff (97.5%)
6. Improving teachers' initial training (95%)
7. Putting alternative and meaningful teaching and didactic strategies into practice (97.5%)
8. Developing a work model based on the group, on cooperation, and on group meetings; developing collaborative practices in the classroom (95%)

9. Improving human resources (more specialized teachers, teachers to cover sick leave and vacancies, etc.) (92.5%)
10. Using new teaching resources (90%)
11. Establishing mediation strategies (90%)
12. Making educational decisions based on recommendations in studies and other experiments (92.5%)
13. Discipline in the classroom (60%)

We would like to point out that the aspect with the lowest consensus is discipline in the classroom. This can be explained partly by the different view our informants have of this term: preventive discipline versus sanctioning discipline:

Punitive control of the order and the legitimacy of the teacher's and institution's authority just because

Clear, rational norms and limits in the classroom, approved by consensus as far as possible

An adequate environment for learning and coexisting

Preventative, functional, inclusive disciplinary system in the classroom, based on dialogue

How is best practice defined?

The concept of “best schooling practice” takes on different meanings depending on the informants. In answer to the question about what they think the term best practice means, the informants repeated the following characteristics most frequently: efficient, effective, meaningful, committed to equity, tolerance and respect, evaluated, and innovative. Other characteristics mentioned, although less repeatedly, are: exemplary, successful, excellent, consensual, public-spirited, systematic, efficient, didactic, motivating, based on premises of informal methodology, arises from practical reflection, generates new resources, tends toward quality, promotes reflection, and generates good results.

The closed responses in the second questionnaire allow us to define the principles that should rule best educational practices:

1. Individualized attention (97.5%)
2. Acknowledgement of informal education (90%)
3. Attention to diversity (cultural, social, linguistic) (95%)
4. Evaluation based on equity (92.5%)
5. Participation of teaching staff and educational centers in self-evaluation processes (90%)
6. Control of the quality of education (87.5%)
7. Assuring quality (92.5%)
8. Flexible, open curricular programs (95%)
9. Guarantee of non-political character (60%)
10. Guarantee of lay education (82.5%)

Progressing according to the assumptions of constructivist learning (meaningfulness of contents, resources, pertinent and realistic objectives) (97.5%)

The issue of the political character of education is the one that shows the lowest level of consensus. We should consider the influence of the continuous legislative change that has occurred in education in Spain in recent years, depending on the political group that is governing at each moment, on this statement; this situation has led to three organic laws in a short period of time. On the other hand, the terms political and political party get confused, causing less consensus in the answers even if they follow the same lines.

By degree of convergence, the characteristics that define “best educational practice,” according to the participants, are:

- Equity, equality, tolerance, social justice, and respect are basic requirements for carrying out best practices (95.5% agree).
- Best practice generates positive results among the students (95.5% agree)
- The process and the results make the effort worthwhile (92.5%)

- Best practice is a reference for other “best practices” (92.5%)

Best schooling practice has different implications for the center and for the teaching team; because of this, the participants point out different aspects that make it easy or difficult to carry out best practice. The most frequently repeated idea is “teamwork” and refers to the need for more communication, collaboration, coordination, and involvement. Within this, what is clearest is the need for the teaching team to coordinate what they do and how they do it.

...collaborative work groups that are established among the professionals in the center based on shared objectives for improving education. Joint action that is well-coordinated.

Another important point refers to what I call “context-dependency,” (97.5% consensus), that is, the center needs to be made to fit the students and the families that belong to it. One of the informants (only one) believes that the center should even attend to the diversity of the teaching staff. This includes the center’s autonomy with regard to other institutions, as well as the teaching staff’s autonomy to shape the curriculum and break the “rules” in order to do what they think is best.

Not establish minimums for everyone because students and teachers have different capacities. The same thing should not be demanded from everyone at the same time; rather, a commitment to creating varied learning experiences is necessary for everyone, students as well as teachers and families.

It also seems to me that one of the key issues is fitting the knowledge to the group of students you have, not all students have the same needs, or the same profile, so fitting the adults to the needs of the minors would give rise to more personalized attention.

Teachers’ attitude is another key issue. In this category, we can highlight the ideas referring to motivation, incentive, and commitment.

I think one key issue is that there be a vocation, interest, and curiosity for learning constantly about how to improve the work each person carries out as a teacher.

There should be more incentives for the teaching staff; teaching work and the involvement it requires should be more highly valued.

The importance of stability in the teaching teams was also pointed out. Training stable teaching teams that share an educational project. The present-day situation in the centers makes this almost impossible or just a chance happening, because the appointment of teachers to the center and to the groups is done almost exclusively by public transfer competitions and seniority.

The teaching staff has another need related to the ability to reflect on practice, the need to think and rethink daily practice:

An atmosphere of constant dialogue between practice and reflection. And between the institutional responsibility received and the profession itself.

The participation of the entire educational community is also important: to coordinate things together, to be involved, and to reach them all. This means that the center must be seen as something that is approachable and useful.

...counting on discussion among parents, teachers, and students, with the objective of managing to get everyone to sit down at the same table to plan things together.

Opening up towards the “exterior” (being part of an Educational Community in a broad sense, not being an “educational bunker”).

Agreeing on everything? Aspects on which we have not managed to reach a consensus

Some of the issues presented in this study have received contrasting responses that show a lack of consensus among the participants. Some of the aspects that people

disagree about clearly define different ways of thinking about education and school. From the intercultural point of view, we believe that these aspects are the essence of the transformation the school needs, although we are aware that many practices do not even come close to this transformation. Nevertheless, we want to insist on these aspects and propose them as points of reflection to provoke a broader vision of the school and of compulsory education as an opportunity for social improvement for everyone.

One of these polemical aspects has to do with school failure. Half of our informants agree that the possibility of school failure should not even exist in the school. Educational achievements should be attained by everyone during the compulsory schooling period. From the “school failure” point of view, commonly understood as student failure, compulsory schooling should have no meaning; the role of the school is, precisely, to reduce social inequalities.

For me, this is the basic reason that the purpose of any educational achievement is to reduce the social inequalities that originate in the interior of a community that considers itself to be democratic.

We asked the informants to debate whether the compulsory stage of school should guarantee that all students attain educational achievements, and we linked this premise to the non-existence of school failure. In this case, the degree of consensus is 50%. The participants complement this premise with clarifications that indicate the need to consider school failure not as student failure but as system failure, which means questioning the structure, the institution itself, not merely the students’ work. Along these lines, we can show the information provided by one of the theoretical informants who participated in the survey:

When we talk about school failure as something that makes no sense, I am referring to when school failure is understood as student failure. I believe that there is school failure understood as the failure of the school for some students. It is fundamental to speak about teaching achievements, that is, to evaluate the extent to which and the way that teaching allows us to comprehend, to modulate,... the achievements that are attained (or not), but that are considered valuable in compulsory education.

Another issue on which we have found a diversity of opinions is the universal or non-universal nature of the definition of educational achievements for all students. This point is closely connected to the subject of students' failure in school. A fixed definition of achievements, the same for everyone, contradicts the principle of equal opportunity and reinforces school failure in many cases. Once again, we find that the opinions are divided, with 50% in favor and 50% against, just as on the previous point. Following the same line of reasoning, another of the points of divergence is in the way educational practices are characterized. In contrast to those who defend the possibility of generalization as the identifying feature of best practices, other opinions underline that best practice...

Is singular, contextualized, and transferable to other education contexts

The possibility of transferral remains open, the possibility of being able to learn from best practice, of reflecting on factors that make success possible, but above all, practice is seen within a context and in response to specific needs. Attending to the diversity of our students also involves acknowledging and carrying out multiple practices. The generalized nature that some people attribute to these practices contradicts the principles that uphold an intercultural approach.

Final thoughts

The Delphi process has contributed different ideas and visions about the concepts of educational achievement and best schooling practice, thus attaining our objective of opening up the perspective which we used to approach these concepts in previous papers, where we started out with a previous model. This has facilitated a reflection on both concepts, avoiding the possible influence that can occur in information-gathering situations where the participants are not anonymous. Because of this, we value the responses gathered positively, because they are rich and varied in their shades of meaning thanks to the experience our participants contribute.

However, we would like to point out some of the limitations that the Delphi technique presents, in our opinion. On one hand, a technique that attempts to arrive at consensual

positions is difficult to apply to issues that are as contested as educational achievement and best practice, where everyone has an opinion arising from personal and/or professional experience. In addition, are we really trying to reach a consensus on these issues? Or would our idea be, rather, to accept different achievements in education and different practices that fit each specific purpose?

On the other hand, the anonymity of the technique, although it allows a certain “freedom” of expression and avoids the influence of dominant opinions, prevents a more real interaction among the informants, an interaction in which they could transmit the reasoning and experiences that back up certain positions as opposed to others.

Finally, we would like to point out that in our application of the technique we chose informants with whom we have a certain affinity; to a large extent, we share the discourse that they present, so the final results will not necessarily be transferable to the entire population.

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