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An exploratory Delphi study on Character Education in Latin-American countries: Argentina, Colombia and Mexico

Bernal, A.[a], Naval, C.[b], Sobrino, C., Varela, A. Dabdoub, J.P.[1]

[a b] *Facultad de Educación y Psicología. Universidad de Navarra. Edificio de Biblioteca, 31080, Pamplona, España*

Resumen

En el proyecto *Researching and Promoting Character Education in Latin American* Secondary Schools, financiado por la *Templeton World Charity Foundation,* nos aproximamos a la percepción que de la Educación del Carácter se tiene en Argentina, Colombia y México. La Educación del Carácter integra las propuestas para promover la ciudadanía. Para el inicio de esta investigación elaboramos un estudio piloto basándonos en la metodología Dephi, con el objetivo de discernir cuáles son los temas más candentes alrededor de la Educación del Carácter en estos países. Esta metodología -rigurosa y de fácil manejo- permite la obtención de un conocimiento en profundidad sobre la problemática de la Educación del Carácter. Contamos con la participación de diferentes expertos del ámbito académico, escolar y administrativo. Durante el proceso realizamos tres interacciones con los expertos para alcanzar un mayor consenso en sus opiniones. Para ello aplicamos dos rondas de preguntas cerradas y abiertas con las que obtener una mayor riqueza y convergencia en los datos obtenidos. Como resultado constatamos que la Educación del Carácter no es un término habitual en el ámbito educativo de estos países. Además, en este tipo de educación incide la influencia y relación entre los agentes y el currículum explícito-oculto en la escuela.

Palabras clave: Educación moral; Educación cívica; Educación del carácter; Educacion Secundaria; Método Delphi.

Abstract

In the project *Researching and Promoting Character Education in Latin American* Secondary Schools funded by the *Templeton World Charity Foundation,* we address how Character Education is perceived in three Latin-American countries (Argentina, Colombia and Mexico). To carry out this research we produced a pilot study based on the Dephi method, in order to find the most burning issues regarding the subject of Character Education in those countries. This methodology offers us a rigorous and easily-managed means

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1 Autora correspondencia: Aurora Bernal Martínez de Soria
  Correo electrónico: abernal@unav.es

of obtaining in-depth knowledge on the problematics of Character Education. For the Delphi study we relied on the participation of various experts from the academic, school and administrative areas. During the process we carried out three sessions with the experts in order to reach the highest possible consensus of opinion. Thus we used two rounds of closed and open questions which resulted in greater wealth and convergence of the data obtained. The result confirmed that Character Education is not a common term in the world of education in those countries. Moreover, this type of education is affected by the influence and relationship between the actors and the explicit-hidden curricula

Keywords: Moral Education; Civic Education; Character Education; Secondary Education; Delphi Method.

1. Introduction

The Delphi study we present belongs to a global research project: *Researching and Promoting Character Education in Latin-American secondary schools (http://www.unav.edu/ web/educacion-del-caracter/presentacion)*, which is funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation. With this project we intend to throw light on character education in Latin-American Spanish-speaking countries as we are aware that most research focusing on character education is produced in English-speaking countries rather than Spanish-speaking ones (Moreno-Gutiérrez & Frisancho, 2009).

Character education has its remote origins in Ancient Greece and is the classical approach to moral education regarding concepts such as virtue, good, happiness and citizenship (Bernal, 1998). Aristotle stated that moral and citizenship education must be acquired through good actions by trying to acquire healthy habits and virtues for individual fulfillment and social growth. The relevance of moral and personal development has been a key factor for educational consideration (Naval, 1993). The link between good education and the development of moral and social virtues, and a pro-citizenship life-style can be found throughout Western societies and connects with other approaches and theories (Bernal, González-Torres, & Naval, 2015).

Despite the fact that the modern concept of character education has its roots in Dewey, nowadays a renaissance of character education (Lickona, 1993), especially in English-speaking countries, has grown in strength over the last few decades, focusing attention on psychological and social research to improve and promote character education in schools by helping children to develop their moral reasoning, social skills, healthy habits and personal and social well-being. Moreover, this kind of education can be useful when dealing with personal and social issues such as academic improvement, bullying, social performance, psychological issues, etc. (Bernal et al., 2015). Different factors (culture, politics, social changes, historical moments, etc.) have impacted on approaches to character education over the years and its very definition; this is why character education is broad in scope and difficult to define (Otten, 2000). At present humankind is facing huge challenges like globalization, robotics, individualism, wars, economic crises, human rights and global warming. For this reason Western countries, in particular, have

increased their efforts to implement new educational programs to help children become good citizens in harmony with society by helping them to develop moral and social virtues, by means of different psychological and philosophical approaches together with the renaissance of character education and Aristotelianism in education (Curren, 2010). In Naval et al. (2015) we can find some different approaches to character education with some coincidences, but also with conceptual differences.

2. Method

2.1. An introduction to the Delphi method

In this exploratory study we decided to use the Delphi methodology to present some statements regarding character education in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico.

The Delphi method has its inspiration in the ancient Oracle of Delphos and her capacity to predict the future (Landeta, 1999). Although this technique was primarily used for military issues, over the last few decades this type of methodology has increased significantly in many research fields, with quantitative and qualitative approaches (Brady, 2015; Green, 2014; Habibi, Sarafrazi, & Izadyar, 2014; Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Maxey & Kezar, 2016; Parker; Powell, 2003; South, Jones, Creith, & Simonds, 2016; Varela-Ruiz, Díaz-Bravo, & García-Durán, 2012).

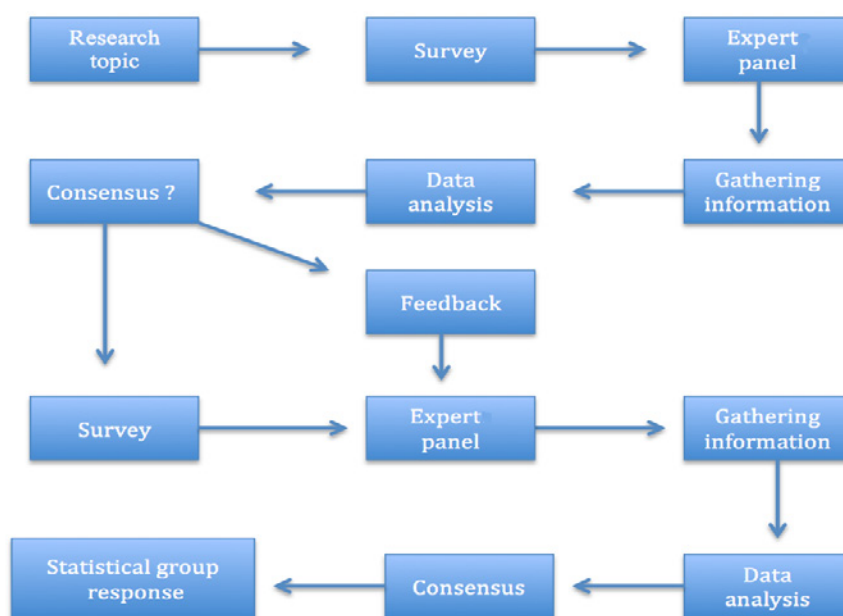**Figure 1. Typical Delphi scheme adapted (Habibi et al., 2014; Landeta, 1999).**

The Delphi process is "a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem" (Linstone & Turoff, 1975, p. 3). To apply this method a panel chart of experts is needed to obtain reliable information about future trends for a specific

issue or topic. Moreover, in order to prevent anyone of the experts influencing others, anonymity must be guaranteed (Landeta, 1999). The main characteristic of this technique is interaction with experts using questionnaires or surveys to gain consensus-building from their opinions; success in achieving consensus is necessary to implement some iterations with those experts supplying questions and feedback about data compiled to reach reliable consensus among the panelists, and the consensus results are usually presented as a statistical response. Nevertheless, qualitative analysis is also applied in the Delphi method (Brady, 2015) to identify the topics where there is general agreement.

2.2. Character Education Delphi process

Our aim was to collect general statements about character education in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. This method allows us get a better understanding about education focused on moral and social virtues in these countries.

By applying this method we managed to bridge the gap with those regions and also save money; these are some advantages of the Delphi methodology. Although, on the other hand, the time spent developing the instruments, finding and contacting the experts, time responses and reminders to participate, email management and communication with the participants are some of the complications of using this methodology.

Table 1. Delphi chronogram.

Months							
Actions	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*October*	*November*
Contacting experts	X	X	X				
Questionnaire design	X	X					
1st Row		X	X				
Data analysis			X	X			
Questionnaire design				X			
2nd Row				X	X		
Analysis				X	X		
Questionnaire design					X		
Feedback +3rd Row						X	
Data analysis						X	X
Diffusion of results							X

We decided to apply two main row-controlled feedback reports, and another final questionnaire to confirm the main issues by trying to reach more consensus in responses. Like South et al. (2016), although they do not add any further information in the third row, we considered the answers obtained previously to be the final ones. Basically the third row gives the experts a chance to "make further clarifications of both the information

and their judgments of the relative importance of the items" (Hsu & Ohio, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore a feedback report was given to all participants after the second row.

Table 2. Number of participants per row by country.

	Countries		
	Argentina	Colombia	Mexico
Initial sample	28	30	31
1st row	22 (28)	17 (30)	21 (31)
2nd row	14 (28)	17 (30)	19 (31)
3rd row	9 (28)	10 (30)	13 (31)

We decided to design the questionnaire with open questions and Likert-scale questions, but we also have included questions of choice –the first and third rows. In our first questionnaire we created different blocks related with general conceptualization regarding character education, virtues promoted in schools, sociocultural context, agents, etc., in secondary schools. In the last two rows we classified questions in various blocks: promoting social and moral virtues, issues, opportunities, needs and challenges.

To manage the delivery of the survey and the data generation we have chosen *Google docs*. This option simplified the data management, and also saved time and resources delivering surveys and collecting information.

Figure 2. On-line survey tool.

2.3. Sample Panelists

One of the principal points when using the Delphi method is the experts' opinion on a certain topic, in this case Character Education. Firstly, we must admit that there is no exact mechanism for identifying experts, or how many should be involved in the study

(Habibi et al., 2014; Hsu & Sandford, 2007). We take an expert figure to be someone who has enough knowledge and resources to contribute in a positive manner to the research topic. In order to do this, and aware that not all the experts have the same degree of knowledge about the research topic (Hsu & Sandford, 2007), we chose, basically, specialists stakeholders linked with the field of education (not only experts on character education) such as schoolteachers, researchers, administration workers, etc. Moreover originally we also tried to add policy-makers; nevertheless the difficulty of generating any beneficial communication forced us to avoid this profile in the study.
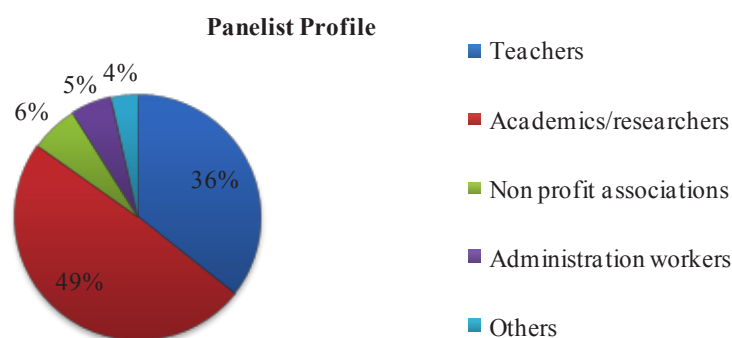

Figure 3. Expert panel composition.

During the process we guaranteed the anonymity of all participants. This was done for two reasons, firstly, to avoid any kind of inference among the participants and, secondly, to give them more freedom to express their opinions. During the sampling process we contacted the stakeholders via email, selecting different universities, research institutes, schools and non-profit associations; furthermore we also used the snowballing technique (Habibi et al., 2014) to identify interested people who would be more interested in our study. In our study, the final sample average was eighty-eight people in total, although, at the beginning, two hundred people accepted our invitation to participate.

2.4. Data analysis

The Delphi process attempts to achieve some consensus or convergence about certain issues through a number of iterations with the participants. We decide to fix the consensus by paying attention to some criteria commonly employed in qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics, that is, a stipulated number of rows, subjective analysis and mode, mean/median ratings and rankings and standard deviation (Von der Gracht, 2012). We established two main rows and a third one to obtain convergence for the questions where it was not achieved earlier. We also used subjective analysis because it was necessary to explore the qualitative data. Finally we carried out statistical analysis to determine a certain level of consensus; in our case a simple majority was enough to achieve this.

For the qualitative data analysis, we used a deductive and inductive approach, principally in the first row. During the qualitative analysis we employed topic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2009).

Figure 4. Sample of deductive categories.

Figure 5. Sample of inductive codes.

For Likert questions we use statistical analysis. In our case mode and mean were basically the statistical analysis applied, as are generally used in Delphi studies (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

Table 3. Statistical analysis example: Colombia second row.

Item	N	M	SD	Max	Min	Md
In the current legislation in Colombia (Ley General de Educación O Ley 115) socio-moral virtues are promoted	15	3,2	0,86	5	2	3
In the current curricular materials and textbooks in my country, the following virtues are promoted: courage, honesty, self-control, gratitude, humility	15	2,7	0,82	4	1	3
At present the curricular design in your country complicates the promotion of socio-moral virtues	16	3,2	1,18	5	1	4

2.5. Results

This study gave us the opportunity to understand what is happening with character education in some Latin-American countries (Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico). Some of the evidence found is useful in explaining that character education is an open concept that includes many aspects from different areas.

Furthermore these countries do not have any subject in secondary schools labelled as character education; indeed subjects related with character education contents are better known as *education for peace, ethical and civic education, or citizenship education.*

> Character education in Colombia is understood as Citizenship Education or Education for Peace. Citizenship education teaches individuals to behave peacefully in society, to participate actively through democratic and peaceable actions in social activities that help to improve the living conditions of their close neighbors and society in general (Colombia 1).
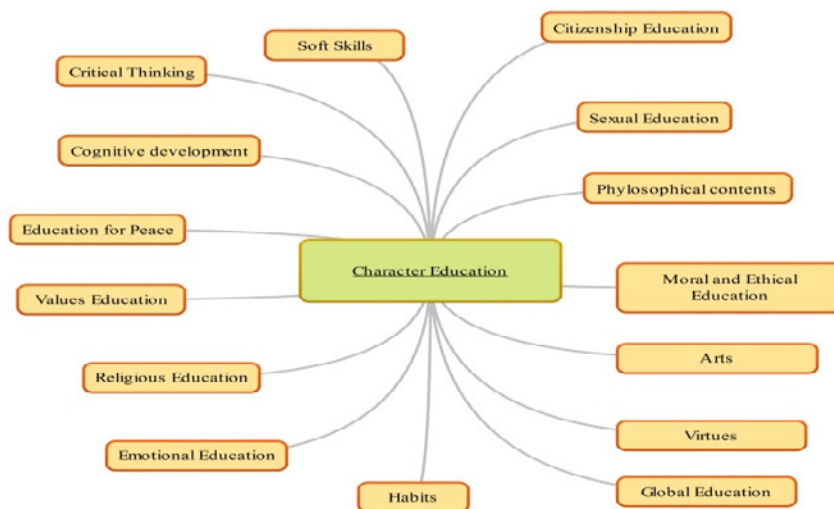
Figure 6. Topics related to Character Education in Latin American countries.

We were unable to find a clear convergence when we asked participants to identify what term would be most appropriate to identify all aspects presented in character education. In the next figure we can see the principal terms selected by participants. On doing so, we realize the difficulty of identifying character education with just one term or expression. In addition to this, another point that shows the relativity of knowledge about character education in secondary schools is the fact that the virtues proposed in our study (courage, honesty, justice, compassion, humility, self-discipline and gratitude) do not seem imperative or important when their promotion in secondary schools is checked. In this case we confirmed that none of them offer a minimum consensus stating that they are performed in a regular way in the schools of these countries.
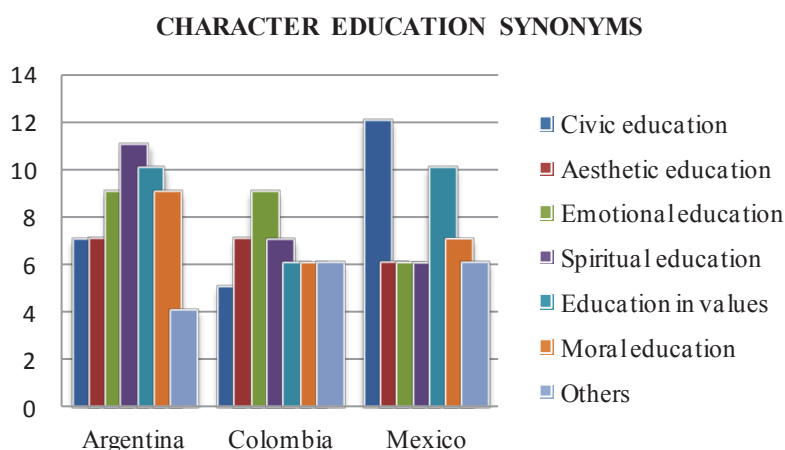

Figure 7. Character education synonimus.

Of all the factors involved in character education, three have an enormous impact on character education. In this study, in all countries the family is the main agent to help children's character to flourish and also to give backing to all the work that schools do

with children. Nevertheless, friendship in teenagers is considered as a primary influence on the development of character education, especially at this age, because friends have an enormous influence on their peers in modifying behavior and are also role models where young people see themselves reflected. We must consider that in present-day society where the difficulties of striking a balance between family life and work life are huge, many children do not have a family to inspire them or to learn manners or social forms, so this kind of issue is more common in society. As one the informants pointed out:

> *At this age, the students are discovering themselves and the surrounding world. If they don't have an attractive model in their family, they tend to find it in friendship and adapt their acts. Some students are less gregarious and so look towards other figures in the media. For character education it is necessary and fundamental that family be a reference for the students and surround them with good friends and other attractive models* (Mexico 1).

Another agent involved in character education with great responsibility is the teacher. The informants concur by affirming that a teacher is a key factor to help teenagers at this stage and also can be a model for the students, especially for those who do not have a steady family to motivate them to be good people and citizens.

The most powerful argument is that the teacher is a model of inspiration for students, both for good and ill.

> *Because teachers committed to their duties, usually make a good impact on their students. It doesn't matter which subject they teach. In fact, many teenagers often like a subject more or less because of the teacher, not because of the contents of the subject* (Argentina 3).
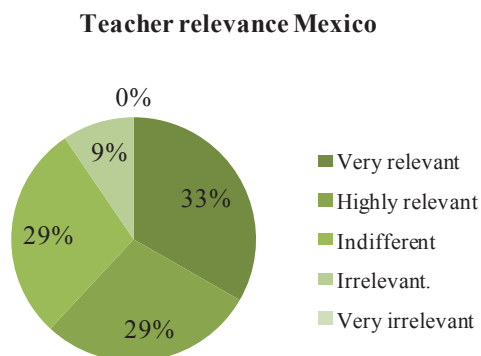

Figure 8. Teacher relevance Mexico
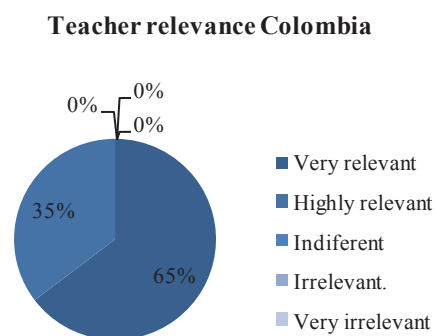
Figure 9. Teacher relevance Colombia

In spite of the fact that in all countries the teacher is considered to be a relevant figure in character education, it does not mean that just any characteristic will be useful for teaching character education. In our study the main characteristics are: open to dialogue, assertive, empathetic and with the capacity to encourage students. Moreover, despite the importance of the teachers for character education, they have to overcome many difficulties, especially in public schools, where classes are commonly over-crowded, have less resources, there are poor work rights, the sociocultural environment can be very tough in many schools, there is a lack of training for teachers, poor attention to

character education, poor parent involvement, etc. These factors can make the difference when implementing and promoting character education in secondary schools.

In addition to this, for our participants the educational laws pay more attention to others aspects such as math, language, etc., especially in regions where Pisa results are weak as in Mexico, instead of character education. Moreover, the approach to this subject is close to civic education or ethical education, which situation does not help to visualize character education in a global sense in schools. Another factor that supports this argument is the general opinion regarding teaching materials provided in these countries. According to participants these resources are not appropriate enough to develop character education in secondary schools; only the materials associated with civic and ethical education have any kind of direct relationship with the purpose of character education.

> *There is a subject called Ethical and Citizenship Education, with its roots in the old Civic Instruction, with some touches of Philosophy. It makes the students face up to the "consequences" of living in society and also implicitly includes the moral and social virtues* (Argentina 4).

Another issue that we have confirmed with this study is the tension between what is taught and what is caught. In our case we achieved a broad agreement among participants that the caught or hidden curriculum has more impact on students when we are referring to character education.
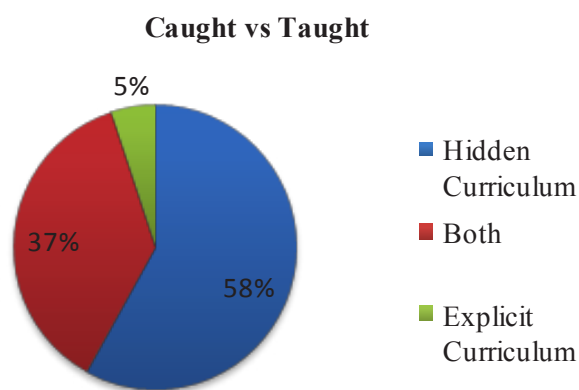

Caught vs Taught

- 5%
- 37%
- 58%

■ Hidden Curriculum

■ Both

■ Explicit Curriculum

Figure 10. Caught vs Taught.

In fact, many participants consider that character education must be a daily performance with good actions.

> *I think that the hidden curriculum is of vital importance because character education must be taught in a vivid, practical, modelling, inspiring manner, in a way that can help it to flourish and be lived naturally. Finally, it's a practical learning process not theoretical one* (Mexico 2)

For many of our participants it does not matter if the explicit curriculum talks about virtues, values, or human rights if these contents do not have the backing of the school community, particularly of the teachers who are in daily contact with students who can be a model for the students. It is assumed that teachers know the contents but is not clear

what kind of performance they must give in class. Even those who are critical of the hidden curriculum are aware that role modelling is a key factor for character education.

> *The hidden curriculum is far away from the virtues. On the contrary, it promotes the easiest things, being late, lies, unpunctuality, irresponsibility that are frequently embodied in the teacher* (Argentina 4).

We also found participants who defend a balance between what is taught and what is caught, but in a smaller proportion. This reflects the unfinished debate between contents vs experiences, books vs performance, official agenda vs particular interests, etc., in character education.

3. Conclusions

Finally, we can confirm that character education in Argentina, Colombia and México is understood as a hold-all where many aspects can be taught in order to achieve some personal and social skills for the well-being of the students and society in general. Furthermore we can conclude that the term 'character education' is not well-known in those countries and its conceptualization is closer to education for peace, civic education or citizenship education in comparison with the virtues approach promoted in other Western countries.

We also can add that there is tension among the agents (parents, school staff, and friends) involved in character education. Despite this, everyone is aware of parental relevance in children's education and that they must be the principal figure; friendship among peers is considered crucial among teenagers due to their capacity to influence for good or ill with their behavior; teachers are seen to be relevant but only if they can successfully manage all the sociocultural issues present in classrooms. Moreover, the weakness of policies related with character education in secondary schools does not help teachers.

Although in this study what is caught is considered more relevant for character education, we have found an open debate between what is taught and what is caught and the importance of both in teaching how to be a good person in secondary schools.

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