

Cultural diversity, educational achievements and school. Arguments from educational community

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Riassunto: *Questo studio costituisce la prima fase di un lavoro più ampio la cui finalità è quella di contribuire al miglioramento della scuola attraverso l'identificazione, elaborazione e diffusione di una casistica di buone pratiche scolastiche in contesti culturalmente diversi. Questa ricerca incomincia revisionando il concetto di "successi educativi" e "buone pratiche" da una doppia prospettiva: analizzando la letteratura specifica per quanto riguarda i contributi più significativi degli ultimi anni sul miglioramento dell'efficacia scolastica e, in aggiunta, analizzando le opinioni dei rappresentanti dei diversi collettivi che hanno a che fare con la materia e denominati in questo studio, "esperti" (docenti, assessori, famiglie, accademici, tecnici e agenti socioculturali). L'articolo si focalizza sulla descrizione del supporto metodologico che ci ha permesso di portare avanti questo processo di consultazione (il metodo Delphi) e sulla presentazione dei principali risultati. In definitiva, presentiamo i punti d'accordo e le discrepanze trovate in riferimento al concetto di "successo educativo". Il processo Delphi sviluppato in questo lavoro è stato iterativo e interattivo. Nel processo si è garantito l'anonimato dei partecipanti, la retro alimentazione costante e controllata e la presenza, nel risultato finale, di tutte le opinioni individuali. Lo strumento per la raccolta d'informazione è stato il questionario. Nella prima fase di consulenza, ci sono state domande aperte che hanno permesso di fare un'analisi qualitativa delle risposte. Partendo da questa analisi abbiamo elaborato un secondo questionario di tipo scalare la cui analisi ha permesso di conoscere il grado di consenso sulle questioni sottoposte a dibattito. La ricerca del consenso e la stabilità sono stati i criteri che hanno guidato le analisi realizzate sull'informazione raccolta nelle due fasi di consultazione e anche i criteri di saturazione di questa.*

Abstract: *This paper is the first stage of a broader study that intends to improve schooling efficacy by identifying, describing and disseminating the best practices developed in Spanish schools from diverse cultural backgrounds. It reviewed two main concepts – "educational achievement" and "best school practices" – from a double perspective: first, analyzing the most meaningful research contributions made in this area over the last ten years; and second, taking into account the opinions of experts (teachers, educational advisors, families, students, theorists, social players...) on these subjects. The paper had two main objectives: describing the methodological framework used in the expert consultation process (the Delphi method) and presenting the main points of consensus and discrepancy*

regarding the concept of “educational achievement in culturally diverse educational contexts”. The Delpi consultation carried out was an iterative and interactive process. The process was confidential and special care was taken to ensure continuous feedback and representation of all individual opinions in the final results. Information was collected using questionnaires. In the first consultation round, the questionnaire included open-ended questions, whose responses were analyzed using a qualitative approach. A second questionnaire was designed on the basis of this information. It provided quantitative information that was useful to measure the level of agreement on the various issues discussed. The search for consensus and stability and information saturation were the basic criteria that guided the analysis of information provided by the experts consulted.

Key words: *effective schools research, student diversity, consultation, outcomes of education, school role, educational objectives.*

Introduction

Identifying best practices and educational achievements in schools is undoubtedly a strategy that contributes to improving schools and their key purpose: teaching and learning. For schools, directories of best practices are useful tools to optimize their organizational structures and teaching-learning processes, thus ensuring what should be the main objective of education, particularly at compulsory levels: ensuring that all students achieve valuable learning, regardless of the cultural group they belong to (Aubert, García, Racionero, 2009).

As stated by Aguado *et al.* (2007, 1), schools are still a key element in societies that uphold principles of participation and social justice, and one of their challenges is to address the diversity of their students; according to these authors, «If it is obligatory for everybody to attend school, schools have the obligation to provide the best educational experiences to all students and strive to achieve the best results for all of them».

Reviewing the educational achievements reached in schools committed to addressing diversity issues and identifying the best practices underlying them is an interesting task that will lead to improvements in school effectiveness (Lingard, 2007).

In general terms, research on the educational achievements of students of various cultural groups has focused on obtaining rates of poor school performance and diagnosing the problems certain students have “adapting” to an educational system with specific cultural codes that are more favourable to some people than others (Abdallah, 2003). According to García

Pastor (2005), cultural differences are perceived as individual deficiencies or problems that, instead of motivating students to achieve valuable educational achievements, make them feel less capable just because they are different.

Education should address the cultural differences of students by encouraging the development of skills defined in the curriculum, providing equal opportunities for all students and eliminating inequalities that already exist or may arise due to the context, understood in a broad sense (Muñoz-Repiso *et al.*, 2000; Cantón, 2001; Murillo, 2004). Indeed, the above are guarantees that any educational system in general and schools in particular should take into account to reach priority educational objectives not only regarding academic performance but also the development of cultural identity and equality (Gay, 2000; Baraibar, 2004).

In the regulations on minimum teaching requirements in compulsory levels (Spanish Royal Decree 1631/2006, Decree 230/2007 and Decree 22/2007), “educational achievements” are associated to what schools intend to develop in their students in order to educate critical citizens and facilitate the transfer from knowledge to social reality.

According to López Salmorán (2011, 1), «educational achievement refers to the set of variables that explain the probability that children and youth will: a) remain at school; b) achieve the learning expected, and c) have a continuous and complete educational journey (...). It also includes self-perception and the expectations of students and their families on the relevance of learning and their ability to appropriate themselves of it».

In the present study, educational achievements refer to all the learning experiences that ensure a systemic and global development of individuals and that are useful for life, linking the academic sphere with students' own personal, family and social context (Zorrilla, Ruiz, 2007; Suárez, 2011). Moreover, teachers, parents and other players involved in education should identify and specify what achievements they intend to reach with their students, their children or their citizens; this is why it was important for the present study to clarify the concept of “educational achievement” considering the perspective of the various players in the education community.

This paper fits into the current debate on the concept of educational achievement and its association only to high performance reached by students. Its aim was to respond to the first objective of a broader study¹ (2006-2009) whose purpose was to contribute to the improvement of schools by identifying, developing and disseminating a directory of effec-

tive school practices to achieve good educational results in schools committed to addressing diversity issues. The study reviewed the concept of “educational achievements” and “best practices” from a double perspective: a) analyzing the most significant theoretical contributions made on these concepts in the last few years, and b) consulting various players of the education community to explore the multiple meanings of such concepts and identify areas of agreement and disagreement about them.

The present paper focused on describing the Delphi method, the methodological tool that made this consultation possible. It also presents the main arguments, discrepancies and points of consensus reached in this consultation on the concept of “educational achievement”.

Methodology

The Delphi method

The methodological tool used in this consultation process was the Delphi Method. For the purposes of this study, this method was considered not so much a data collection method but rather as a strategy for group communication that provides access to individual, group, independent and consensus-based opinions (Linstone and Murray, 1975; Landeta, 1999; Scott, 2001; Brummer, 2005; Gordon and Pease, 2006; Pérez Juste, 2006 and Pozo and Gutiérrez, 2007; Astigarraga, n.d.)

The Delphi method has often been used as a qualitative prospective method in the business world; yet, its possibilities as a method for structuring a group communication process have led to its use also in other areas and disciplines as a methodological strategy to elicit opinions on a subject and reach consensus in a group. According to Gordon *et al.* (2006) and Scott (2001), one of its main advantages compared to other data collection methods is the possibility of managing a higher number of factors related to a subject than other methods involving only one person. In the general discussion, each participant contributes his/her ideas on the issue discussed on the basis of his/her epistemological knowledge and experience.

The consultation process was *iterative*. Participants, whose anonymity was guaranteed, expressed their opinion in two rounds. In this process, continuous and controlled feedback helped steer the group towards consensus, identifying divergent opinions and justifying the reasons for such

discrepancies. The statistical response of the group ensured the representativeness of each individual opinion in the final result of the group.

The criteria according to which it was estimated that the consultation process would end were established *a priori*. Such criteria were *consensus* (understood as a degree of convergence of individual estimations between 75 and 90%, depending on the subject) and *stability* (understood as the absence of significant variability in participants' opinions between successive rounds regardless of the degree of convergence). In the process, consensus was reached in the second round, thus stability of opinion was also reached and the consultation was finalized.

The degree of convergence defined for each dimension was set by the research team on the basis of the diversity of responses given in the first consultation round and the debate generated around the issues from a theoretical and practical perspective. Agreements, divergences and other data of interest for the study were identified by analyzing the content of responses given by participants.

In the last consultation stage, the final report was produced and the main arguments generated in the process were sent to participants. For the research team, it was particularly relevant and interesting to link the results of this consultation to the other stages of the broader research project and draw useful conclusions to prepare observation protocols and interviews and make decisions about the description of best practices and educational achievements.

The consultation process began by defining the profiles of participants and their selection criteria. The aspects considered in the selection process included interest and concern about the subject, theoretical, practical, technical and political knowledge of the subject, links with projects with a focus on diversity or culturally diverse contexts and motivation to participate in this kind of process. Based on such factors, participants were divided into the following profiles:

1. *Specialists*: this group included academics specialized in cultural diversity and education issues, regional government officials in charge of programmes aimed at innovation and improvement and cultural diversity, "general" advisors and intercultural advisors of teacher training centres. The first and second consultation rounds included 25 and 19 participants, respectively.

2. *Practitioners*: this profile included members of primary and secondary education school management teams, teachers involved in cultural diversity projects and motivated by the subject, family members of primary and secondary education students, representatives of parent associations, members of non-profit associations and bodies with an active role in education and cultural diversity. The first and second consultation rounds included 37 and 21 participants respectively.
3. *Facilitators*: this group included people not directly working in this area but with expertise in the subject to clarify and compare definitions of other experts on educational achievements and best educational practices. Their contributions were particularly useful because of their reflective approach and the conceptual clarity of their contributions. These 3 facilitators participated in the first round but not in the second.

The total number of participants was 65 in the first consultation round and 40 in the second round. The geographic scope of the study was the Spanish national context and participants were mainly contacted by e-mail.

Instruments for data collection: Delphi questionnaires

Questionnaires were the basic instrument for data collection. The first was an open-ended questionnaire developed from the theoretical contributions made by the *Movimiento de Mejora de la Eficacia en la Escuela* (Movement for the Improvement of Efficiency in Schools) and research on diversity and education.

An analysis of the content of responses to the first questionnaire identified a number of statements, which were used to form the basis of the second consultation round. The second questionnaire included closed and scalar questions that were used to obtain information about the degree of agreement or disagreement of participants on the statements extracted from the first questionnaire. A few open-ended questions were also included to allow participants to make new contributions.

Table 1 shows the major headings used to cluster the questions made in the two consultation rounds.

TABLE 1. Delphi Questionnaires 1 and 2

| <i>Delphi Questionnaire 1</i> | <i>Delphi Questionnaire 2</i> |
|--|--|
| EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Definition</i> ✓ <i>Achievements reached</i> ✓ <i>Achievements that should be reached</i> ✓ <i>Aspects that should improve</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Level of agreement regarding:</i> ✓ <i>Definition</i> ✓ <i>Specificity regarding: Students, Schools, Teachers, Educational practice, Families, the Community and Education regulations</i> ✓ <i>Aspects that should improve to achieve this</i> ✓ <i>Educational principles underlying them</i> |
| BEST PRACTICES | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Definition</i> ✓ <i>Implications</i> ✓ <i>Facilitating aspects</i> ✓ <i>Obstacles</i> ✓ <i>Concerns</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Level of agreement and prioritization regarding:</i> ✓ <i>Characteristics</i> ✓ <i>Facilitating factors for their development</i> ✓ <i>Obstacles to their development</i> |

As mentioned earlier, the search for consensus and stability was the basic criterion guiding the analysis of information provided by participants in the consultation rounds.

Analysis of contributions made in the first consultation round

Information obtained with the first Delphi questionnaire was subjected to a qualitative analysis. The analysis focused on several dimensions – some previously set and some *emergent* – used to segment and organize the information. Three types of arguments were identified: consensus-based, divergent and singular (arguments given by an respondent and for which no opinions in favour or against were found among other respondents).

When analyzing the contents, the research team always tried to maintain the language used by each participant without producing an academic discourse distant from the opinions and reflexions of respondents. This was ensured by using a procedure based on analyzing “textual” responses and associating them to a phrase or statement with the same meaning (“paraphrasing”). This was useful to analyze the content, documenting the different dimensions and sub-dimensions of the analysis, obtain a global view of all these levels and retrieve the original text of respondents whenever necessary. Table 2 provides an example of this procedure with a question.

TABLE 2. Analysis of Delphi Questionnaire 1

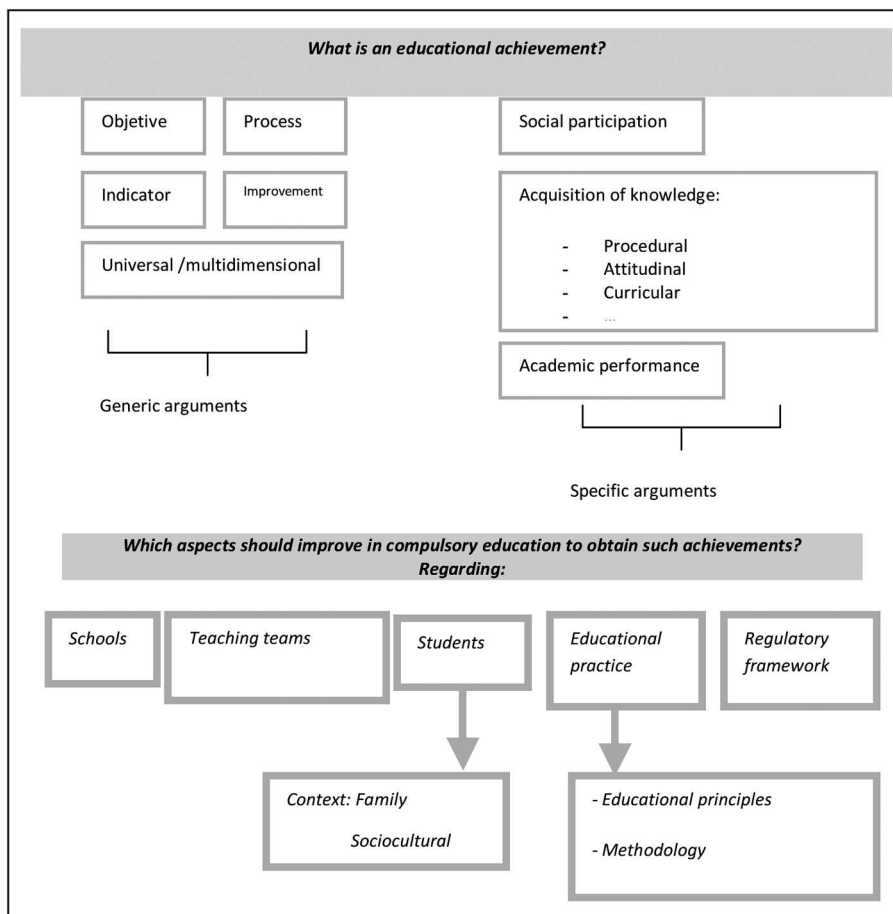
| <i>Which aspects should improve in compulsory education to obtain good educational achievements?</i> | | |
|---|--|--|
| PHRASE | PARAPHRASE | Dimension/sub-dimension |
| Id: 10 Aspects that are cross-cutting for all compulsory education and that, in many cases, would lead to highlighting procedural and attitudinal contents. | “Procedural and attitudinal contents” | R E G U L A T O R Y F R A M E W O R K – Relevance of current education regulations E D U C A T I O N A L P R A C T I C E – Development of basic skills: procedural and attitudinal skills |
| Id: 16 It is necessary to better address diversity issues and secure greater investment and more human resources (support staff, guidance counsellors, social workers, mediators, ...). | “Address diversity issues (...) greater investment (...) more human resources” | E D U C A T I O N A L P R A C T I C E – Improve infrastructure: human resources – Address diversity issues |

For each question, a summary table was developed with all the information identified in the questionnaires to determine the dispersion or convergence of contributions of participants. The table provided an overview of the most represented dimensions by analyzing the frequency of the arguments identified.

This analysis procedure was validated by the members of the research team who had theoretically reviewed the topics of the study; they provided valuable opinions on the classification procedure applied to the text, the paraphrasing and the name and structure given to dimensions and sub-dimensions. These members also made suggestions and proposals for further analysis in the following consultation rounds.

After making the appropriate changes, dimensions of analysis were established for each of the subjects proposed for discussion; Chart 1 shows an example of this analysis structure for two of the subjects addressed in the first consultation round: 1) *What is an educational achievement?* and 2) *Which aspects should improve in compulsory education to obtain good educational achievements?*

CHART 1. Dimensions of analysis. Delphi Questionnaire 1



Analysis of contributions made in the second consultation round

As mentioned above, an analysis of the content of participants’ responses in the first round identified a number of statements with various degrees of convergence. Such statements were included in the following questionnaire (Delphi Questionnaire 2), which formed the second round of the consultation.

The aim of the second round was to seek common positions and meanings shared by respondents on the subjects dealt with by the study. Analyses performed included measures of central tendency (means and medians) and indices of dispersion and variability (standard deviation, coefficient of variation and interquartile range). Estimations made from these analyses were used as indicators of the situation of individual participants and the duration of the procedure itself.

Discussion of the Results

Main arguments

A high level of consensus was found in participants' responses on the defining characteristics of the first topic of the study: "Educational achievements in compulsory education". The values of the standard deviation and the coefficient of variation shown in the following table provide statistical information about the homogeneity and little dispersion of opinions.

TABLE 3. Analysis of Delphi Questionnaire 2

| | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard deviation</i> | <i>Coefficient of variation</i> | <i>Percentage of convergence (Consensus set at 75%)</i> |
|---|----------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Planned objectives | 40 | 3.10 | .841 | .27 | 75% |
| Not necessarily planned | 40 | 2.80 | .883 | .32 | 60% |
| Defined by the teaching team | 40 | 1.55 | .677 | .44 | 90% agreement |
| Jointly defined by the education community | 40 | 3.55 | .597 | .17 | 95% |
| Referring only to students | 40 | 1.55 | .639 | .41 | 97.5% disagreement |
| Referring to schools, teachers, students and families | 39 | 3.62 | .544 | .15 | 95% |
| Greater consideration to achievements referring to students | 39 | 2.95 | .793 | .27 | 75% |

| | | | | | |
|--|----|------|-------|-----|------------------|
| Defined for each student | 39 | 2.97 | .778 | .26 | 72.5% |
| Universally defined | 40 | 2.33 | .944 | .41 | 50% |
| Referring to products | 39 | 1.54 | .720 | .47 | 90% disagreement |
| Referring to the process and the product | 40 | 3.55 | .597 | .17 | 95% |
| Should be reached by all students | 36 | 2.56 | 1.157 | .45 | 50% |
| | | | | | |

In spite of the consensus shown by most arguments of experts, it should be noted that the following three aspects fell below the 75% consensus level established:

1. An educational achievement refers to valuable results that are not necessarily planned or explicitly intended (60%)
2. Educational achievements should be universally defined for all students (50%)
3. Educational achievements should be reached by all students (50%).

A closer review of these elements might seem to suggest that the statistical analysis shows certain contradictions in the responses. One of such cases was whether educational achievements refer to previously planned objectives (75% convergence) or should refer to results that have not been planned beforehand (60% convergence). The absence of extreme scores (“Totally disagree” or “Totally agree”) on this question was interpreted as the existence of consensus among respondents on the idea that educational achievements refer to targets or objectives that have been defined beforehand but also to results that have not been planned *a priori* but are considered positive.

It is also worth mentioning the players or dynamics of educational practice that educational achievements were related to. This question was introduced in the second consultation round even though responses given in the first round only referred explicitly to students without considering other players or educational processes in the definition. Only two respondents referred to all the players of the education community, so this element was included in the design of the second questionnaire:

I think an educational achievement in compulsory education can only be considered as such if it affects, considers or includes all the stakeholders and not only some of them (Id. 7. Profile: Theorist).

... I consider that achievements are not only limited to one area but can be linked to all the areas of school life (Id. 20. Profile: Advisor of teacher training centre).

This consideration was subjected to discussion in the second consultation round. According to 97.5% of participants, educational achievements should not only refer to students but also to schools, teachers and/or families (95% convergence). An example of how respondents explained this opinion is found in the following text:

Educational achievements are also related to the socio-educational environment of the members of the school community (families, students, schools, teachers...). I would highlight the importance of access to and type of means of communication and culture present in the family, school and social environment of students (books, Internet, TV programmes, mobile phones) (Id.40. Profile: Representative of parent association).

Despite the broad agreement on this point, 52.5% of participants admitted that educational achievements should take students more into account. This leads to questioning what recognition other players have as guarantors of educational achievements in practice. Another possible explanation is the following: when talking about achievements, participants do so making proposals and thinking about social desirability issues (and therefore state that they should refer to all the players of the education community); yet, when they describe or refer to daily practice, they only associate educational achievements with students. In other words, achievements are perceived in everyday school practice as pertaining to students and are programmed, planned and recognized that way.

Another interesting point regarding the definition of educational achievements was whether they are related to processes or products. In the first consultation round, few experts referred to this double facet of achievements; yet, as shown by the results mentioned above, a lack of response does not imply disagreement with a statement. In fact, when the issue was raised in the second round, massive agreement (95%) was reached on the idea that achievements should be considered taking into account

both the process and the result. Some of the statements obtained in the responses to the first questionnaire that led to submitting this question to debate in the second round were the following:

When I think about educational achievement I think of the product of a person's journey (Id. 32. Profile: Teacher).

Anything that makes the learning process rich, free and shared (Id. 31. Profile: Teacher).

I agree that the process is much more important than the product, because such processes should not necessarily lead to the same product and that's where the richness of education should lie, in being able to see the different points of view provided (Id. 31. Profile: Teacher).

In order to narrow down the concept of educational achievement and considering that this question generated a great deal of information in the first consultation round, this debate was pursued in the second round. On this occasion, different dimensions were distinguished. The debate was focused on "educational achievement" in relation to students, schools, teachers, educational practice, families and/or education regulations and the education community.

A cross-cutting idea was found in the information provided by participants in the first consultation round on achievements regarding students: according to participants, such achievements should focus on the development of cognitive and social skills, such as independence (in learning, decision-making...), critical skills (reinterpretation, critical reading skills, a critical attitude towards social problems...), socialization (equality, tolerance, empathy, respect, solidarity...) and coexistence values. Other contributions associated achievements to specific dimensions of the curriculum and the learning of intellectual procedures and strategies, particularly information management techniques and use of new technologies.

When these issues were subjected to debate in the second round, homogeneous responses and little dispersion were found among the opinions of participants on the characteristics of educational achievements regarding students. Yet, the percentage of convergence was not very high, as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Achievements regarding students

| <i>ACHIEVEMENTS REGARDING STUDENTS</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard deviation</i> | <i>Coefficient of variation</i> | <i>Percentage of convergence (Consensus set at 70%)</i> |
|--|----------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Prioritize academic skills | 40 | 1.50 | .506 | .34 | 50% |
| Prioritize socio-affective skills | 40 | 2.23 | .862 | .39 | 65% |
| Prioritize acquisition of concepts | 40 | 1.95 | .986 | .51 | 70% |
| Prioritize acquisition of procedures | 40 | 2.48 | .960 | .39 | 55% |
| Prioritize acquisition of values | 40 | 3.50 | .599 | .17 | 95% |
| Achievement: Socialization | 39 | 2.72 | .887 | .33 | 62.5% |
| Achievement: Independent and critical attitude | 39 | 3.18 | .885 | .28 | 77.5% |
| Achievement: Type of students | 40 | 2.38 | 1.055 | .44 | 55% |

Opinions of participants on the need to prioritize conceptual skills over procedural or attitudinal skills were interesting; in total, 42.5% of experts totally agreed with this statement, understanding that knowhow and socialization regarding coexistence values and attitudes are also present and reached in the educational system. When the statement was inverted to ask whether the educational system prioritizes the acquisition of procedural skills, 55% of respondents disagreed. A joint reading of both results suggests that participants found a balance between both types of educational achievements. As a complement to such analysis, 95% of responses showed agreement on the need to focus educational achievements on the acquisition of values related to respect, coexistence and commitment, among others. A few examples of responses on this issue in the open-ended questionnaire were the following:

(...) the acquisition of essential values for living in society (Id. 17. Profile: Advisor of teacher training centre).

(...) the acquisition of socialization habits" (Id. 21. Profile: Principal of primary school).

From a general point of view, I identify them with socializing individuals to respect and implement democratic values and principles; understanding compulsory education as a vital process that we have to cherish for the benefit of individuals and the community (Id. 32. Profile: Teacher).

In line with the previous questions, it was decided to discuss what kind of socialization respondents referred to. The aim was to find out whether they understood it as a social and cultural reproduction of the existing order or whether, on the contrary and/or as a complement, it was understood as students' ability to participate in their environment in a critical, active and creative way. According to 45% of respondents, one of the achievements reached in compulsory education is related to socialization of students, understood as "*the social and cultural reproduction of values and rules*". About the same percentage (42.5%) of respondents totally agreed that compulsory education manages to elicit an independent and critical attitude in students.

As regards achievements referred to schools, participants highlighted certain aspects such as encouraging relationships between students, schools and families. However, when participants were asked whether such achievements are reached in compulsory education, convergence was not very high. Consensus was reached in both cases: 73% of participants considered that such achievements are reached in the case of students; yet, the same percentage argued that schools do not manage to provoke or maintain such relationships between families.

According to participants, another example of educational achievement was schools reaching a sufficient degree of respect and acceptance of diversity; however, 64% of respondents considered that this is not real, and 82% of participants considered that schools do not encourage relationships between diverse families.

The opinions of experts on the relationship between innovation and educational achievement were also interesting. Among participants, 75% considered that implementing innovative practices represents an educational achievement; however, 78% considered that the fact of innovating does not guarantee success in reaching educational achievements. These responses were considered extremely interesting by the research team, who consider that they explain to a great extent the definition of achievement regarding the product but also the processes. This distinction is clearly reflected in the following comment made by a participant:

The fact of innovating in the classroom does not guarantee that students will reach positive or desirable achievements, but is very positive depending on the type of innovation and on what one calls innovation (Id. 31. Profile: Teacher).

In the second consultation round (Delphi), 55% of respondents considered that education regulations are not sufficient or appropriate; 77% considered that they should be redefined for educational achievements to be reached. According to 65% of respondents, skills included in the regulations are not sufficient or appropriate. The comment of a secondary education teacher on this issue is a good example:

It is necessary to talk about commitment to applying the regulations. Skills set in education regulations differ depending on each area. Overall, I consider them insufficient (Id. 24, Profile: Teacher).

Another issue discussed was which aspects should improve to reach educational achievements. Interestingly, when this question was asked in the first consultation round, all participants used a very similar discourse referring to solidarity and equality and very close to legal texts and political discourse, that is, to “an ideal” or “what is accepted”. This made it very difficult to develop a battery of statements in the second Delphi questionnaire for participants to express their level of agreement. After several cycles of review and improvement, thirteen aspects were proposed to find out the opinion of experts. In general terms, only one of them (*Classroom discipline*) received answers with varied percentages, although there was agreement on the concept, understood as:

A set of clear and rational rules and limits in the classroom, based on consensus as far as possible (Id. 50. Profile: Representative of parent association).

A good atmosphere of learning and coexistence (Id. 24. Profile: Teacher).

(...) interactions, rules that regulate the behaviour of teachers and students (Id. 6. Profile: Theorist).

A classroom discipline system that is preventive, functional, inclusive and based on dialogue (Id. 34. Profile: Teacher).

As shown in Table 5, a high level of consensus among respondents was reached on all other aspects.

TABLE 5. *Aspects that should improve to reach educational achievements*

| <i>Aspects that should improve to reach educational achievements</i> | <i>Percentage of convergence (Consensus set at 90/%)</i> |
|--|--|
| 1. Independence of schools | 92.5% |
| 2. Reconceptualize schools as open, diverse, inclusive, integrating and respectful places | 92.5% |
| 3. Strategies to encourage student participation in class | 95% |
| 4. Involve students in their own learning experience | 97.5 |
| 5. Promote ongoing training and retraining of teachers | 97.5 |
| 6. Improve initial training of teachers | 95% |
| 7. Implement alternative and meaningful teaching strategies | 97.5% |
| 8. Develop a working model based on the group, cooperation and participatory processes Develop cooperation practices in the classroom | 95% |
| 9. Improve human resources (greater presence of specialized teachers, replacement teachers, etc.) | 92.5% |
| 10. Use new teaching resources | 90% |
| 11. Establish mediation strategies | 90% |
| 12. Make educational decisions based on recommendations of studies and other experiences | 92.5% |
| 13. Classroom discipline | 60% |

Finally, the analysis explored the relationship between the principles of compulsory education and attainment of the educational achievements proposed. In this case, participants showed a high level of consensus considering that such principles should govern compulsory education, as shown in Table 6. Principles are understood as premises that refer to structural, formal or global issues that transcend daily practice but determine it and allow it to develop.

TABLE 6. Convergence regarding educational principles

| <i>EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES</i> | <i>Percentage of convergence (Consensus set at 80%)</i> |
|---|---|
| 1. Individual attention | 97.5% |
| 2. Recognizing non-formal education | 90% |
| 3. Addressing diversity issues (cultural, social, language diversity) | 95% |
| 4. Equality-based assessment | 92.5% |
| 5. Participation of teachers and schools in self-assessment processes | 90% |
| 6. Education quality control | 87.5% |
| 7. Quality assurance | 92.5% |
| 8. Flexible and open curricular programmes | 95% |
| 9. Guaranteeing non-political education | 60% |
| 10. Guaranteeing non-religious education | 82.5% |
| 11. Moving beyond the premises of constructivist learning | 97.5% |

The principles of *guaranteeing non-political and non-religious education* generated some disagreement among participants. It is clear that such statements elicit contrary opinions in the education community. This is particularly true in Spain, where four General Education Acts have already been enacted following changes in government. Nevertheless, the research team consider that these results do not show whether participants were expressing a wish or making an analysis of the current situation.

Regarding the second principle, a recurrent theme in today's socio-political context, 82,5% of respondents agreed that non-religious compulsory education should be guaranteed.

Conclusions

One of the first conclusions reached was the high level of consensus among respondents about the definition of educational achievements. Such achievements were understood as attainment of previously planned targets or objectives; yet, it was also admitted that achievements can also be reached without predefined objectives. Both conditions highlight the

intrinsic value of educational realities in schools. Daily experiences in classrooms have multiple meanings because of the diversity of educational practices, the different contexts where they take place and the players involved in such situations. Teachers who mediate in such classrooms tend to give them value in practice, as they have to adapt to the context, the group and the people in each situation.

Second, total consensus was reached on the idea that educational achievements should reflect a balance between academic, procedural and socio-affective skills. These results are consistent with a skills-based educational approach. They highlight the importance of holistic education that trains socially competent individuals who are able to adapt to a society in continuous change. However, as shown in some studies (Abdallah, 2003; Aguado, 2003; Baraibar, 2004; Aguado *et al.*, 2007), various achievements should be taught and learnt at school, both on an academic and personal level. They all have a space in the curriculum of Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education and are reflected as the minimum criteria required at such levels of the curriculum (Spanish Ministry of Education and Science Orders 2211/2007 and 2220/2007). These contributions are also consistent with the existence of an almost majority consensus on the educational achievements that should be encouraged at school. The experts reached the following conclusions:

- At school, educational achievements should focus on acquisition of values related to respect, coexistence or commitment.
- An educational achievement is the development of an autonomous and critical attitude in students.
- An educational achievement of schools is the development of social relationships between students.

According to participants, specific examples of educational achievements of students include the acquisition of procedural skills (study techniques, information management, mastery of new technologies...), social and cultural reproduction of values and rules and the development of an independent and critical attitude in students.

The third conclusion reached from the consultation process is related to achievement as a process and/or a product. Regulations on the development of the Compulsory Education curriculum also refer to evaluating the learning process and the results obtained by students. At present, there is a paradox regarding this issue, given that the process does not usually receive much consideration when learning is assessed. Our prevailing culture is

still based on school success and focuses more on results than processes. This shows that educational contexts do not usually take into account the experiences and situations of students outside the school or consider such previous knowledge as a reference for learning. In addition, the current educational system highly focuses on results and ranking schools at different levels. This leads to a very reductionist understanding of achievement that refers exclusively to learning “attained” by students according to the criteria established. This is measured at the end of a cycle or year with an assessment whose purpose is to verify learning rather than educate. The paradox is clear in the case of students who have learnt a lot compared to their prior knowledge but have not reached the minimum levels. It would be logical to ask whether such students do not reach any achievements.

Fourth, another finding of this study is related to the possibility and the fact that schools can detect problems in the family and community environment and not only student learning issues, a reductionist approach. This was defined by experts as an achievement and a success of the educational system. According to several authors (Abdallah, 2003; García Pastor, 2005; López Salmorán, 2011), this reinforces the idea of schools as units, microsystems that are part of a more complex fabric where the success of the individual becomes the success of the group and vice-versa. According to the experts, for educational achievements to be reached it is necessary to redefine current regulations and include a different way of understanding schools from a broader perspective. As stated by Aguado (2010), the way we see, think of and understand school influences our expectations and therefore our actions as education professionals. This can explain the value teachers give to classroom experiences, where daily practice is built on the basis of each reality and the people that form it, with all their background of experiences.

The fifth conclusion is that, according to participants, it is an educational achievement to increase the knowledge of students and promote and develop strategies for interaction and participation among various educational players (students, schools and families). Yet, convergence on these issues was not very high. The data showed a discrepancy between theory and practice, between what “should be” and what “really is”. This reflects a gap between what we know as professionals that we should do for schools to facilitate the attainment of educational achievements and what is really done inside the classroom (and its lack of openness to the outside world). The inevitable question that follows is, Why does this happen?, What pre-

vents a good relationship between the curriculum and student learning and between schools and the various educational players? Precisely, as shown by Suárez, García-Cano and Pozo (2008), most experts considered this aspect as a limitation for achievements to be reached. They even stated that, in general, schools do not have a close connection with their environment. This led the research team to question the model of school underlying this, in which administrative schedules and requirements set the pace, sometimes disregarding the complexity brought about by diverse realities. Yet, many professionals build their work daily on the basis of each context, an effort shown in the directory of best practices in schools provided by Aguado *et al.* (2011).

This model of school was further explored from the perspective of the experts consulted. To this end, the second consultation round included questions on the educational principles that should form the basis of an education aimed at reaching achievements. The principles that reached the highest level of consensus were the following:

- Individual attention
- Recognizing non-formal education
- Addressing diversity issues (cultural, social, language diversity)
- Equality-based assessment
- Participation of teachers and schools in self-assessment processes
- Quality assurance
- Flexible and open curricular programmes
- Guaranteeing non-religious education
- Moving beyond the premises of constructivist learning (significance of contents, resources, appropriate and realistic objectives).

Regarding the involvement of teachers in schools, it is important for such professionals to receive recognition and social prestige as well as encouragement from schools themselves (Nieto, 2006). It is necessary to increasingly move towards really participatory and democratic school models so that most students can reach educational achievements. If this does not happen, we should question the success or failure of schools. Today, when so much is said about the importance of educational innovations, the reality of schools is not approached from the perspective of their target group. Which students do schools highlight as being successful, and which students do they continue to stigmatize? Why is this so? Even if we continue to implement so-called “innovative” practices, such practices are not educational achievements *per sé* or promote their attainment among students

or in schools. The experts consulted highlighted several aspects that should improve for educational achievements to be reached:

- Independence of schools
- Reconceptualize schools as open, diverse, inclusive, integrating and respectful places
- Strategies to encourage student participation in class
- Involve students in their own learning experience
- Promote ongoing training and retraining of teachers
- Improve initial training of teachers
- Implement alternative and meaningful teaching strategies
- Develop a working model based on the group, cooperation and participatory processes. Develop cooperation practices in the classroom
- Improve human resources (greater presence of specialized teachers, replacement teachers, etc.)
- Use new teaching resources
- Establish mediation strategies
- Make educational decisions based on recommendations of studies and other experiences.

Finally, in agreement with Fullan (2000), we consider that a profound structural change should be made in schools and that more stimulating environments for teachers should be promoted. If schools become learning communities for all, involving the various sectors that they are composed of, we will undoubtedly also contribute to students reaching achievements. This will ultimately promote the construction of a more engaged society. Nevertheless, this requires a change of approach, a shift from a culture of success to a real culture of education that respects cultural diversity and is committed to equality and social justice.

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Notes

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