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Mediation as a process for the management of conflict and the improvement of coexistence in educational centres. A study based on the perceptions of secondary school students

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Abstract

School mediation is a strategy which is increasingly being implemented in a greater number of educational centres because of all its benefits. Besides being a communicative process which allows confronting conflicts in a participative manner, it involves learning different social and personal skills. Ultimately, it enables the strengthening of the students' interpersonal relationships while fostering coexistence at school. If coexistence is built by action and the school is a setting where continuous interactions occur, it seems appropriate to think of the school environment as a place to learn how to coexist. Nevertheless, the studies aimed at knowing the impact of mediation are scarce. This article presented here arises from this context, given the need as well of implementing quality mediation actions and programs at school. The main goal is to learn about the students' feedback. The students participating in mediation processes came from secondary schools in Valencia (5 centres), Castellón (4 centres) and Alicante (5 centres). By means of an *ad hoc* designed survey, information from 310 students has been collected. A descriptive and inferential study shows as a result the broad agreement among the participating students in evaluating mediation very positively, stressing its impact in conflict resolution and in the prevention of serious, violent situations. On the other hand, the main reason to attend mediation was identified to be the solution of problems, while name-calling and rumours were the most frequent source of mediated conflicts. Regarding things for improvement, it becomes clear the need to provide information about mediation services at schools, to train all students and to expand the roles of mediation.

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1. Introduction

Coexistence must be one of the educational cornerstones of the 21st century and the school –a setting where constant interactions take place and where pupils spend a great amount of time– presents itself as a suitable social environment for learning to coexist. The learning and practice of values such as the promotion of solidarity, peace, tolerance, mutual dialogue, justice, and individual and social responsibilities, or a pro-active and inclusive attitude, need to be present in the day-to-day reality of the educational centres and be part of the educational project.

These circumstances require the teaching staff to be constantly updated to respond more efficiently to the current educational reality. This is the context in which mediation has shown its educational potential with plenty of mediation initiatives developing in the Spanish territory.

The pedagogical sense of mediation could be summarised in terms of three educational purposes: conflict resolution, prevention and personal strengthening. Although we must not forget that mediation's ultimate aim should be to encourage both a good coexistence environment in the educational centre and a culture of peace. Along these lines, authors such as Boqué (2003, p. 12) understand mediation involves a little push towards the longed-for social cohesion since, by including the different participants of a conflict, it promotes comprehensiveness; by accepting different versions of reality, it supports plurality; and by fostering free decision- and commitment-making, it contributes to democratic participation. In a similar vein, Bonafé-Schmitt (2000) sees mediation mainly as a truly educational process for all its participants –more than just an efficient conflict resolution technique–, enabling the creation of new solidarities among different community members. Thus, the benefits of mediation can go beyond the school borders and into society as the learned competences are transferred.

However, as Smith (2003) points out, there is a scarcity of programs assessing the effectiveness of mediation within the European context. And without this type of assessments it will be hard to know if the education purposes of mediation, already highlighted, can be achieved. In line with Andrés & Barrios (2006), Pérez Pérez (2007), and Torrego & Galán (2008), we believe that the assessments of school mediation practices are required in order to carry out quality programs. This is the only way we will be able to know if mediation works, and what its educational impact and difficulties are.

The following article, which is part of a broader research, arises from this context and given the need of implementing quality actions and programs on school mediation within the educational setting.

2. Objectives

This work presented here has the following aims:
- To learn about the assessments on school mediation given by students from fourteen secondary schools in the autonomous region of Valencia.
- To highlight the strong and weak points of school mediation from the secondary students' point of view.
- To identify differences, if any, among the pupils' views from the provinces of Castellon, Valencia and Alicante.

3. Design and methodology

3.1 Sample

The study sample consists of 310 students from fourteen secondary education public schools from Valencia (105), Castellon (94) and Alicante (112). We have used a nonprobability purposive sampling procedure.

The students' average age is 14.95 years, with a high variability as there are subjects from the ages of 12 to 23. Regarding gender, there is a slightly higher percentage of females (53%) than males (47%). According to school year, 85.4% of them are studying compulsory secondary education and 14.5% are in 6th Form (Bachelor). It is worth stressing that the most numerous groups in the sampling are from the 2nd and the 4th year of ESO, with a total of 73 students per class.