

How Conflicts are Resolved in Three Learning Communities

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the main intervention method used in response to school conflicts in three different Learning Communities. The actions taken to resolve school conflicts were therefore identified, along with their implications. The information was gathered through communicative narratives (students) and in-depth interviews (teachers, families and volunteers) in three Learning Communities. A content analysis was then performed, with the help of a category-based system. The results reveal a mixed use of three conflict resolution models: disciplinary, mediator and community. In conclusion, it is important to highlight the fact that schools which have gone through the entire process of transforming themselves into Learning Communities were found to have a firmer commitment to the community conflict resolution model than those who have not yet completed the process.

Keywords: peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution, learning communities.

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende desvelar cuál es el modelo de intervención ante los conflictos escolares que preside la práctica educativa en las Comunidades de Aprendizaje (en adelante CCAA) estudiadas. Para ello se identifican las acciones adoptadas en la resolución de los conflictos escolares y las implicaciones que conllevan. La información se ha obtenido a través de relatos de vida (alumnado), y entrevistas en profundidad (profesorado, familias y voluntariado) de tres CCAA. Se realizó un análisis de contenido ayudado de un sistema categorial. Los resultados muestran que los tres modelos de resolución de conflictos; disciplinario, mediador y comunitario aparecen entremezclados. Como conclusión se subraya que los centros que han transitado por todas las fases del proceso de transformación en CCAA manifiestan un grado de implicación sólido respecto al modelo comunitario de resolución de conflictos frente a los que están aún en procesos inconclusos.

Palabras clave: convivencia, resolución de conflictos, comunidades de aprendizaje.

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Introduction

The educational value of conflict for peaceful coexistence

Peaceful coexistence at school is based on mutual recognition and respect between people who share a system of rules and regulations (Arboleda & Gaviria, 2009); if respect is lacking, then conflicts arise. Peaceful coexistence in the school context is based on a set of principles, coupled with a subjective component based on assessment (Jares, 2006).

The keys to peaceful coexistence depend on whether rules are understood as an external system imposed from outside or as guidelines based on a process of self-regulation that seeks to ensure harmonious cohabitation of a shared space (Vizcarra, Macazaga, & Rekalde, 2013). The rules of peaceful coexistence enable people to live side by side without hurting each other or feeling hurt by others. When the rules of peaceful coexistence are established jointly by all members of the educational community, their learning becomes a curricular goal: "The rules that govern peaceful coexistence should be agreed upon, established and, where necessary, enforced through participatory processes in which everyone should play a key role" (Casamayor, Antúnez, Armejach, & Checa, 2006, p. 34). Engaging in democratic, participatory processes for establishing the rules of peaceful coexistence in the school environment may help all those involved to learn to live together

harmoniously, debate ideas and defend one's own ideas against differing points of view (Lorenzo, 2004; Torrego, 2006). Thus, in the future, these people will have confidence in their ability to cope with situations of conflict and to resolve any problems they may face, finding positive solutions that are in the best interests of the whole group, thanks to each party's individual contribution.

It is important to move towards the participatory management of peaceful coexistence in schools "in order to improve the teaching-learning processes and to prevent and eradicate violence" (Torrego, 2006, p. 29). According to this model, peaceful coexistence is understood as a process of construction involving students, teachers and families, based on personal and social development theories for internalizing values and self-regulating behavior (Campo, Fernández, & Grisaleña, 2005). People are viewed as being jointly responsible for solving conflicts, without waiting for someone else to take control of the situation by imposing their will by force (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2004). The field of physical education has often been used as a test bed in which to observe and analyze children's behavior (Olweus, 1993; Rossi, Tinning, & McCuaig, 2009; Tinning, 2001).

Conflict has been defined from many different perspectives within the school environment, with some highlighting its negative connotations, while others view it as an indis-

pensable part of peaceful coexistence (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Puig et al., 2012). Conflict is viewed by Learning Communities (from here on LCs) as an opportunity for engaging in dialog and thinking about problematic situations (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez, & Flecha, 2006). It is viewed as something that helps students solve their problems through dialog (Elboj & Niemelä, 2010), although the initial step in the process is always to avoid its emergence whenever possible. Using dialog in situations of conflict helps to instill values and the principles of peaceful coexistence in such a way as to foster children's autonomy (Gatt, Puigdellívol, & Molina, 2010) and confidence (Mayes & Cohen, 2003), making cases of violent behavior between peers less likely (Padrós, 2014).

The idea of an LC has emerged as a model that goes beyond the workings of a traditional school in an attempt to provide an adequate educational response to our changing, globalized society, which is increasingly marked by differences between privileged and underprivileged contexts (Jaussi & Luna, 2002; Jaussi, 2008). The aim is to construct knowledge collectively, transforming social relations in the classroom and turning problems into opportunities (Díaz-Palomar & Flecha, 2010).

The process followed by a school wishing to become an LC is divided into four phases (Cifuentes & Fernández, 2010; Ríos, Herrero, & Rodríguez, 2013; Tellado, Serrano, & Portell, 2013). The first phase is

awareness raising, in which the community learns about the project and strives to improve peaceful coexistence by fostering shared goals, shared responsibility, solidarity and participation. The second phase is the dream phase. It is here that families, teachers and students begin to define what they want their community to look like, in order to build a common dream, with spokespeople from each group. The next phase is priority selection and organization (Zudaire & Lavado, 2002), and seeks to analyze the context by reflecting on the most urgent needs. Strengths and weaknesses are identified, and between 2 and 4 priorities are selected, to be regulated by a management committee. Meetings between the different groups which together make up the community are encouraged and fostered. The last phase is the learning contracts phase, which helps foster commitment to joint collaboration and encourages active listening and the shouldering of individual responsibilities (Padrós, García, De Mello, & Molina 2011; Petreñas, Puigdellívol, & Campdepadrós, 2013). No one in the community is pushed to the sidelines, and everyone, no matter their origin, plays a key role in the working dynamics generated, through mixed commissions, interactive groups and open debates, in which families and volunteers form a natural part of the open education process (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013).

The Learning Communities approach proposes a conflict preven-

tion model based on dialog and participation as a means of improving peaceful coexistence, and defines three models for conflict resolution: the disciplinary model, the expert or mediator model, and the dialogic or community model (Flecha & García, 2007).

In the disciplinary model, the authority of the institution is paramount. This model is characterized by having a set of regulations that stipulate the severity of the different offenses and the corresponding types of admonishment or punishment (Aubert, Duque, Fisas, & Valls, 2004).

The mediator or expert model aims to move beyond this to involve all concerned parties in the establishment of a solution. With the help and mediation of an expert who is in no way involved in the conflict, the aim is to reach a solution through dialog between all those concerned. Although this model generates a certain degree of dependence on the external expert, mediation can serve as a means of fostering participation (Casamayor et al., 2006; Vinyamata, 2006). It also encourages active listening, helping people to understand others' emotions and giving a first-hand account of their own feelings, while at the same time helping them view criticism as a learning opportunity (Torrego, 2006).

The community or dialogic model aims to prevent or, when necessary, discover the causes and origins of the conflict and find consensus-based solutions in which all

parties concerned are involved. Any rules established are the result of dialog and negotiation. The method seeks to introduce improvements in both the personal and social spheres by encouraging the members of the community to assume joint responsibility. Rules are preventive, and measures are taken to try and encourage people to internalize both them and the values they represent in order to prevent behavior which may lead to violence (Flecha, Melgar, Oliver, & Pulido, 2010; Flecha, Pulido, & Christou, 2011; Oliver, 2014; Padrós, 2014). The solutions that this model aims to find follow an autonomous moral reasoning that goes beyond the heteronomous moral reasoning of mediation (Kholberg, 1981). As such, their development requires time, reflection and a willingness to live in accordance with one's autonomously-built values when trying to cope with life's difficulties (Mayes & Cohen, 2003).

In its search for scenarios in which to work on conflict resolution using the community model, the LC approach has focused on physical activity and sport. Due to its experience-based nature, in addition to motivating students (Sánchez-Oliva et al., 2014), this subject also enables them to attain good satisfaction levels in relation to the activity itself (Baena-Extremera & Granero-Gallegos, 2015) and to improve peaceful coexistence in and the cohesion of the group (Fraile, Ruiz-Omeñaca, López-Pastor, & Velázquez, 2008; Rossi et al., 2009). It also enables

students to learn to channel the aggressiveness that accompanies any situation of conflict in a more constructive manner (Macazaga, Rekalde, & Vizcarra, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to determine the main intervention methods used in response to school conflicts in the different Learning Communities studied. To this end, the following aims were established: to identify the actions taken in the resolution of school conflicts; and to analyze the educational implications of these actions.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in three primary schools from the Network of Learning Communities in the Autonomous Region of the Basque Country (Spain). Two are state schools (S1 and S2) and the third is a private school which receives some state funding (S3). A total of 10 interviews were held with different people: 1 male and 3 female primary school teachers (at least one from each school); 1 headmistress (from S2), 3 mothers (1 from each school) and 2 volunteers. Furthermore, 3 communicative narratives were gathered from students (2 boys and 1 girl, one from each school). Two of the schools (S1 and S3) were in phase 2 of the transformation process (dream) at the time of the study, although they

had already received training and had started thinking about the conflict resolution methodology they should apply as a Learning Community. They had not, however, implemented any specific actions in this sense. The other school (S2) had completed all the phases required to become a Learning Community, and had incorporated certain conflict resolution measures into its organization, as a natural part of its everyday working. These measures included giving everyone the opportunity of expressing their own opinion “about what happened” and listening to others with an empathetic attitude. This dialogic method is used in both group-class assemblies, which are held with the aim of providing direct and immediate guidance to those involved in the conflict management process, and in tutorials. Tutorials are sessions in which specific attention is paid to working on students’ ability to express their own needs and opinions, based always on the principles of respect and empathy. It is during these sessions that an attempt is made to clarify the causes or roots of the conflict. Alongside these practices, other techniques are also used, including the “mouth-ear chair” method (a special corner is set up with an ear chair and a mouth chair; the person sitting in the ear chair may only listen, and only the person sitting in the mouth chair may talk; participants have to reach an agreement before swapping chairs). Schools were selected randomly.

Instruments

In-depth interviews were conducted and narratives were collected individually.

Procedure

The research project was presented to the management teams of all three schools and the corresponding permission was requested and granted. The management team helped the researchers contact one person from each participant group. The interviews were recorded and interviewers also took notes. The audio recording was later transcribed and all documents were then uploaded to the Nvivo platform for analysis.

The analysis instrument used was a category system built within the Nvivo program, which helped with the analysis and organization of the results. All texts were categorized and summaries of each category were compiled in order to draft the interpretative reports. The categories highlight the topics that emerged during the interviews and are both inductive and deductive in nature. They are inductive because they emerged from the responses given, and deductive because they are based on the questions asked in the script, which were in turn inspired by scientific theory. The number of references included in each category was recorded using the NVivo 10 program for the processing of qualitative data, in which the program itself counts the references

included in each category, although “the importance of the analysis does not lie so much in the computer support, but rather in the categorization of the information, which consists of searching for common themes which enable results to be obtained in accordance with the study aims” (Gómez et al., 2006, p. 67). According to this perspective, in a qualitative study, the number of references is only part of the evidence, and not a particularly important one at that. It should certainly never form the basis of the argument. It may sometimes occur that responses which are vital to the treatment of the topic are not very frequent, but the mere fact of their being mentioned may be of great importance (Cabero & Loscertales, 1996). In order to identify the origin of the comments made, speakers were assigned a code (for example: S3_NS) in which the first two characters specify the school (S1, S2, S3), the next character specifies the instrument: N-narrative, I-interview, and the last character identifies the group: S-student, T-teacher, F-family or V-volunteer.

Results

The most common solutions adopted by interviewees in response to conflicts are linked to the three models described by Aubert et al. (2004) and Flecha and García (2007). Thus, references were made to solutions linked to the disciplinary model, i.e. rule enforcement (63 references);

to solutions in which the aim is to establish a dialog through mediation in the presence of an adult (54 references); and to solutions in which the whole educational community co-participates in the conflict resolution process (19 references). The number

of references recorded are shown in Table 1.

Although we found that a mixture of all three conflict resolution styles was used in all three schools, they were later studied separately and are presented as such here.

Table 1

Category System Associated with Common Conflict Resolution Methods

Dimension	Category	Sub-category	Resources or Num. interviews	Num. references	%
Common solutions	Disciplinary model		13	63	46.33
		Admonishments and punishments	16	35	25.75
	Mediator Model	Who enforces the rules?	10	22	16.17
		Disciplinary solutions involving the Community	3	6	4.42
		Supervised dialog	20	54	39.69
		Mediation and consulting	20	28	20.59
		Mediation and consulting	12	18	13.22
		Liking for being able to express their opinion	6	8	5.89
		Community model based on emotional education	6	19	13.97
	Empathy	3	5	3.68	
	Active listening	3	5	3.68	
	Respect and trust	4	9	6.61	
	Total			13	136

Solutions linked to the disciplinary model

In all three schools the most common solutions adopted (46.33%) are those associated with rules and regulations, although these rules and regulations are understood differently, depending on the methodology applied. Admonishments and punishments are mentioned in 25.75% of cases. From the perspective of the disciplinary model, conflicts are usually understood as a failure to respect the rules, and a punishment or admonishment is applied based on the principle of authority. This is a fairly common way of acting in all three schools studied.

Int: Do you remember what steps were taken to solve this problem?
 Student 2: They were punished. Because they didn't stop; they were told to stop but they kept hitting each other. (S3_NS)

However, from the perspective of the community model, admonishment or punishment is only used when the situation makes it unavoidable, because limits have to be set. In such cases, the punishment is usually reparatory in nature, fulfilling an educational function which lays down a series of red lines that must not be crossed.

Sometimes there is no other alternative and authority must be imposed. It depends on the problem or the specific student in question. Sometimes you have no choice but to step in be-

fore things get any worse. But once the line has been drawn, we try and talk about things calmly, we try to reason with the student about their behavior... (S2_IT)

Rules and limits are basic principles common to all conflict resolution methodologies. Differences emerge in relation to how the principle of authority is understood and which solutions are applied. During the transition to becoming an LC, schools often come up against resistance when trying to encourage a more autonomous method of conflict resolution. The way in which we have been socialized often prevents us from understanding that there may be other ways of resolving differences.

...in order for everyone to coexist peacefully there have to be certain rules and these rules have to be abided by. If they are not respected... If everyone does what they want, then there can be no peaceful coexistence, right? (S3_IF)

All the groups from whom information was elicited (management, teachers, students, families and volunteers) talked equally about punishment. When asked who was responsible for enforcing rules, informants mentioned the top management, as evident in the following response:

Well I would say me, as headmistress, and my colleague, the deputy head responsible for curriculum

programming¹. Basically the management team (laughs) ... depending on the problem, sometimes an urgent solution is required and someone has to make decisions. Sometimes involving the whole community is impossible. (S2_IT)

References were also made to other decision-making bodies such as the School Board, AMPA (Parents' Association) and the Highest Representational Body² (HRB). Even if a protocol exists for cases of conflict, it is not always something with which the whole educational community is familiar.

If the conflict is serious, we get in touch with the family. I would imagine that if two people are involved, they will be summoned and allowed to explain themselves, to give their account of what happened, right? And then they'd get in touch with the families, with the teacher who was there at the time, the tutor, etc. And if it's a serious case, I would imagine that they'd take it to the school board to see if a punishment is in order, or to decide what

to do, what disciplinary measures to take. (S3_IF)

When those in the school are unaware of the protocols in place, when these protocols are not socialized, the intervention model tends to be disciplinary.

There is a protocol in place which varies depending on the type of offense. I expect other colleagues could explain it better than I, since I've never yet had reason to report any behavior of this kind. (S3_IT)

In the case of both top management and the HRB, in one school the dialogic function supersedes the imposition of punishments.

If a conflict is very very serious, it is dealt with by the HRB. Both parents and teachers are there ... but the conflict is not brought to them so they can punish those involved. Rather, the aim is to find a solution, to help them. It's not just a case of deciding their punishment and that's it. The HRB doesn't meet often, because it's a total headache, but we do meet whenever necessary. But meetings are not just called when there's a conflict. We meet to management the school, whenever necessary. (S2_IT)

In any case, we observed that the schools prefer to opt for dialog, and tend to begin with dialogic measures, applying disciplinary measures only when this avenue has been exhausted.

¹ This figure (*jefe de estudios* in Spanish) is a member of the management team and is responsible for coordinating and directly supervising the implementation of the curriculum and teaching syllabuses. He/she is also responsible for coordinating academic activities, drawing up and supervising timetables and organising the different classes (Basque School Act, 1993).

² A body specific to Learning Communities in which all members of the educational community are represented and which has the authority to make decisions regarding issues affecting the school.

I believe ... that after having met to try and reach an agreement, if no agreement can be reached, the educational team and the headmistress are the ones who make a decision, they usually inform the inspectorate and we always refer the case to the educational guidance center... (S1_IT)

It is mainly teachers who have an opinion about who enforces the rules. The schools in our study are currently immersed in a process of transition from a more disciplinary model to a more participatory one. The aim is for the community in general to assume shared responsibility. However, while an attempt is made to involve the community, the solutions provided are disciplinary (4.42%). Given the number of responses in this category, it seems there is a certain degree of discipline-oriented inertia, despite the fact that schools are striving to foster participation.

Well, we definitely try to follow these rules, and if there is a conflict then the school board gets involved independently. If the case is only a minor one, then I resolve it myself. But first of all the children talk to each other and we try to resolve the matter. Then we try and talk to the parents, the management, the board... but the issue is generally discussed by the whole educational community. (S3_IT)

What none of the informants question is that when families get involved, the solutions reached are better. Understanding their view of the matter helps resolve the conflict.

It is easier to manage conflicts if the families also participate in the punishment, or in the decision that is made. It's much better if the families also contribute their take on the matter or suggest a possible solution. (S1_IT)

Informants mention the possibility of meeting in small working groups in order to resolve different cases, and when they start thinking about this, they are able to visualize how this would work.

As tutors we often have doubts ... what should I do, how should I act? And there are various participatory mechanisms within the school structure. Tutors, parents, students and, I suppose, everyone can and should participate. Maybe not all at the same time, because there are a lot of us, but sometimes small working groups are set up... (S1_IT)

The contradictions between what is aspired to and what is actually done may stem from the fact that the schools were in a transitional stage at the time of the study. Moreover, most of the responses included in this section came from those schools which were in the dream phase (S1 and S3).

Solutions linked to the mediator model

Mediation (39.69%) is a step towards community intervention. It is based on supervised dialog and aims to foster active listening. Su-

pervised dialog is the subcategory with the highest number of references (20.75%). The majority of references that refer to dialogic solutions focus on dialog between peers; they are included in this model when they are encouraged and guided by teachers.

When various different children are involved and a lot of trouble has been kicked up, the best way to solve the matter is by talking, not hitting. The teacher or someone with a clear vision is the first to speak... (S1_NS)

When an effort is made to resolve conflicts through dialog, there may be dialog fostered and managed by teachers, or dialog fostered by teachers but managed by students.

During tutorials we try to resolve problems by talking about them. It's during tutorials that students can talk and express themselves, and if anyone has had any problems with anyone else, they can sort it out with the tutor's help. I know because my daughter tells me everything... (S2_IF)

Rules agreed upon through dialog are usually established by participants with the help of a guidance figure. In two of the three schools studied, this solution is proposed not as a real situation, but rather as one which would be welcomed and successful.

I believe families, teachers, students and other members of the community would welcome being asked

to participate in the laying down of rules. In fact, I think they already do take part in it... (S1_IT)

There are initiatives in the field of Physical Education which are based on the conflicts generated during the course of competitive games. Teachers try to provide time for students to think about their behavior, and to sort out their differences after listening to each other and exchanging opinions.

The teacher gives us 5 minutes ... we sit in a circle in the playing field and if there's a problem or conflict then the person involved raises their hand and says, for example, so-and-so insulted me, and we talk about it and sort it out... in a circle... if there were two people involved, say, they go to one side and the teacher asks if there are any other problems. If there aren't, everyone goes and the teacher stays behind with the first two. (S2_NS)

In general, informants thought it was a good idea to be present when rules are established, although resistance generally tends to emerge in response to the idea of building an agreed-upon set of rules, due to the conflict of interests that may occur between the different parties involved.

What do I think about everyone participating in establishing a rule? Well, it's a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't it? Because no rule will ever please everyone. But at least they have the opportunity to be there, to give their opinion, talk

about it and be heard. But I'm not sure it wouldn't become problematic in the end, right? Because, well, as I said before, each person is a law unto his or herself. (S3_IF)

Different people make different decisions and adopt different strategies in response to situations of conflict. Some prefer to resolve problems by sitting students in a circle, while others take those involved aside so they can talk, viewing the conflict as a learning opportunity.

I want there to be conflicts in my house, because I want my kids to know how to resolve them later on out in society, because they'll always be problems and they have to learn how to solve them. When there's a conflict in my class we sit down in a circle. I give them some time to calm down a bit. And when they're calm we talk. They have to put their hands up. In other cases, if there are just two people involved, I take them aside while the others carry on with what they were doing. I leave them in a corner to calm down and then they talk to each other. The main thing is for them to express their feelings and to understand how the other person feels. (S2_IT)

Although references from school number 2 are more frequent in this subcategory, all three schools expressed a desire to foster supervised dialog. Furthermore, all the groups interviewed talked equally about dialog. When trying to promote a mediator model, protocols are established and actions are systematized. The

figure of the mediator also emerges, as the person to whom people turn when matters arise that need resolving. Mediators are people who put those involved in the conflict in contact with each other, so they can find a solution.

When we get angry there are some teachers who ask us things. Sometimes, when something really serious happens people turn against them. (S1_NS)

The person acting as mediator begins by providing positive reinforcement in situations involving violence between children.

We have been working on positive reinforcement for some time now, we are focusing on the importance of not hitting, you see? There are moments in which they calm down and make progress. (S1_IT)

In certain situations involving bullying or unfair resolution of conflicts between peers, a dialog-based approach is adopted in which the opinions of the whole group are listened to and consensus-based solutions are sought.

There are times when I call a halt to the whole process... if the conflict has been "solved" (*air quotes*) because the leader says so and that's that, then I call a halt. We sit down in a circle and talk about it, because that is no way to resolve a conflict. It is an imposition and that's not what I'm trying to achieve here. (S2_IT)

Despite saying that they wish to foster dialog and that teachers play the role of mediators, only a very few informants talk about who establishes the rules. It would be interesting to find out more about the commitment of those involved. Unless the rules are established by those who have to abide by them, then even when there is dialog, the model is still disciplinary.

In tutorials, when a problem arises what we do is solve it among all of us, the class and the teacher. So then the person with the problem gets a chance to say what happened, ... (S3_NS)

The figure of school consultant emerges as the person responsible for mediation. He or she is responsible for bringing those involved together and is consulted before any further steps are taken. The majority of informants offload their concern onto this figure, who is the person responsible for such matters. This may seem positive, because at the end of the day there is someone specifically charged with establishing protocols, but in reality it is a far cry from the community model, since the presence of this figure relieves everyone else of the need to be concerned or involved. Thus, there is no reflection and the solution reached is heteronomous.

I don't know who makes decisions in the case of a serious conflict. But I know the consultant is involved (...). I assume the school has some

kind of protocol in place for situations like that, but I don't know what it is. (S1_IF)

The ideas gathered in relation to mediation come mainly from students and teachers, with families hardly mentioning it at all. Students generally talk positively about being able to express their opinion. Schools which are transitioning towards the community model value active listening, although the most common strategy is still to use vicarious learning to resolve conflicts. A joint process of reflection is carried out regarding the consequences of one's actions and behavioral alternatives.

I believe I have had the opportunity to express my opinion in order to resolve some problems, and when I've talked, people have listened, and I like that. (S1_NS)

Statements such as these suggest that those schools in the initial stages of training in the community model have begun to opt for dialog as a mediating method, and that students like being asked to participate.

Solutions linked to the community model

Attitudes and solutions used in response to conflicts were recorded that involved making those involved accept co-responsibility for the problem and jointly participate in its management. These solutions

are related to empathy, active listening and responding to the other person's needs afterwards, ensuring respect and trust at all times (13.97%). Working on empathy is important within the community model, since it helps prevent conflict. Within the community model, prevention is seen as being just as or even more important than adequate conflict resolution (3.68%). Teachers especially highlighted the fact that there are moments in which you have to "put yourself in the other person's shoes" in order to understand what is going on or to prevent the problem from escalating.

We hope that things will calm down and students will be able to put themselves in the other person's shoes, understanding both how they themselves feel and how the other person feels... but it's not easy. (S2_IT)

Empathy must be taught, and students should be helped to think about the consequences of their actions for those around them. It is important for students to learn that everyone has feelings, everyone suffers, everyone can feel happy and different people can feel the same thing.

The main thing is for them to understand that hitting is not acceptable, because the other person will get really angry too... (S1_IT)

Empathy is hard for younger children, since they find it difficult to understand that they are not the only ones in the world, and that other

people may want the same things as they do.

Sometimes, at this age, when they are so young... but if you work on it, if you keep an open mind, then slowly they start to understand. They are very egocentric at this age, so they just say no. (S1_IT)

Television often interferes with empathic education and has an impact on the way in which conflicts are resolved at school.

I try to get them to distinguish between fantasy and reality, helping them understand that they can play fight, but that they mustn't really hurt each other. When they are playing in the psycho-motor skills room, they can play and they can get hold of the sticks and start hitting, but they can only hit the floor, the crash mats or the foam blocks. Then they throw them on the floor and break them, symbolically at least. They can do that there, but it's just a game and they don't really break. (S1_IT)

Fostering active listening is one of the characteristics of the community model. It was highlighted by all groups interviewed, who underscored the need to teach children to listen actively (3.68%). Informants also talked about giving children the freedom to express their complaints or negative feelings, based on the idea that active listening plays a preventive role. It is important to note that references to this were made also by informants from S1 and S3.

I believe that the most important thing is to listen, to let them express themselves, tell you what is happening. I think it's great that they are encouraged to sort out their problems themselves. (S3_IF)

In a situation of conflict, everyone thinks they are right and rarely does anyone stop to analyze the problem from the other person's point of view. Accepting that the other person has a point and understanding that there is generally more than one side to every argument is a difficult skill that requires much work.

To solve the problem, he said he would try and calm down. It took a while but finally he listened and chose the second option, which was to try and put himself in their shoes, right in front of them. The solution is rarely to barge right in and start yelling at them without first understanding what triggered the conflict in the first place. (S1_IF)

When active listening by children is encouraged, the intervention of adults is rarely needed. Prior mediation by an adult thus becomes part of a learning process in which children gain the skills they need to ensure the dialogic management of their conflicts.

Int: Do you think that when you are able to say what annoys you, you feel better? S2: Yes. Then the other person says well if that annoys you, this annoys me, so if you don't do that, I won't do this ... you know? When everyone says what it is that

annoys them, it's easier to sort it out. We're learning with our teacher. She says we have to learn to get on with each other. Because afterwards, once you've forgiven them, you ask yourself why on earth did I get so annoyed with that person over such a stupid thing? So yes, things get sorted out easier when we say what we feel. (S2_NS)

Informants stated that the atmosphere in this school (S2) is very relaxed, and that this helps encourage certain actions and active listening techniques during conflict resolution.

The atmosphere isn't tense... and when there's a situation of conflict at school we try not to over-dramatize. We sit down and talk about it, we listen and try and find logical and reasonable solutions. Years ago now, we set up... I don't know whether you noticed... an area by the door with two chairs, one with an ear on it and one with a mouth on it... Well we set it up and used it quite regularly, at the beginning at least. We still use it sometimes, in fact, just the other day we had two students sitting there. When there's a conflict and those involved can't seem to reach a solution, they sit there, one in each chair. The one in the ear chair has to listen and the one in the mouth chair gets to talk. One talks and the other listens, then they swap round. If they still can't reach an agreement, then someone else has to intervene... but it's a space for listening and for talking about the conflict that has arisen... (S2_IT)

An effort has been made to create a climate of respect and trust (6.61%). This is something that mainly concerns teachers, who want to ensure that their students don't feel inhibited if they want to speak. They also want to ensure that the good habits acquired during the early school years bear fruit later on.

They are only small problems, they're not major ones, but that's also because this school has always done things this way - I've never seen it done anywhere else. The trust that is built here with teachers is wonderful... I've never felt inferior. I'm just another member of the community. It's like a family. (S2_IF)

Some of the teachers interviewed said they were aware of the vicarious effect of their behavior on students, and highlighted the importance of being able to "control" their impulsive responses in tense or stressful situations.

You obviously can't shout at a child to get them to stop shouting. When there's a conflict I try to stay calm, because if I get angry so do they, and I always prefer to try and convey a sense of calm. (S2_IT)

In practice, it is not always easy to remain calm. Even when you understand the theory and are trying hard to implement it, it is not always easy to react calmly, without getting angry. It requires great effort and self-control.

Of course I get angry sometimes, but I usually manage to control myself. What teacher wouldn't get angry when they see two students fighting? I firmly believe, however, that in order for there to be an agreeable atmosphere, I have to help create it. I have to help create an agreeable atmosphere by not shouting... (S2_IT)

Creating an atmosphere of respect and trust is seen as a fundamental aspect of this model. Informants believe that teacher training should include emotional education, in order to help trainee teachers gain a better insight into their own emotions, reactions and attitudes. They understand that it is difficult to control yourself in certain situations, especially if you have not received any prior training.

We have received a lot of training in this sense, and it really helped us. Within the LC a certain amount of money was earmarked for teacher training, so we organized a course... I was delighted to attend because controlling one's emotions is vital in conflict resolution. We have worked on this topic a lot, both among ourselves (*the teachers*) and in the classroom. It certainly helped me, at least. (S2_IT)

Informants stated that they thought it was important to provide similar training to families. This is something that hasn't been done to date, due to the fact that this group is more difficult to access. Students, on the other hand, have received some training in this sense.

After going on the course, we passed the knowledge on to our students. Sometimes training is carried out in three stages; first the teachers go on the course, then those running the course go to our classrooms to train the students and finally, we talk to the families, organizing lectures or other similar events. When I first started teaching I was much younger. I had much more energy and was much more idealistic, but I believe that this training has really helped me improve my relationships... (S2_IT)

Nevertheless, not all three schools have attained the same level of reflection, something which may be explained by the fact that two of them are still in the dream phase. It is worth highlighting the fact that S2 was the school most represented in this third category.

Discussion

Learning Communities strive to move towards community models of conflict resolution, although they do not always achieve this objective. In the cases studied here, all three models described by Aubert et al. (2004) were found to coexist at the same time. The majority of solutions reported by S1 and S3 were disciplinary, with punishments or admonishments being applied automatically in accordance with a set of rules and regulations that are not always agreed upon in conjunction with the community, and which are applied by those in authority (Rossi

et al., 2009). In such cases, conflict is not seen as an opportunity to grow and learn (Flecha & Soler, 2013), nor is it considered an educational tool (Puig et al., 2012). Rather, it is viewed as a problem to which a fast solution must be found, even if, in the long term, this benefits neither the children nor their environment (Mayes & Cohen, 2003). In the case of S2, which has made considerably more progress along the path towards implementing the community method, disciplinary solutions indicate that certain rules cannot be broken and are generally associated with making reparation. Despite having recourse to disciplinary actions, all schools try to involve the community, since they are aware of the fact that incorporating different viewpoints into school life in general, and into situations of conflict in particular, is a vital requisite for finding dialogic, consensus-based solutions that will help improve peaceful coexistence within the school environment (Petreñas et al., 2013; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the fact that two of the schools had not moved beyond the dream phase probably had an impact on the results, and explains why the number of references to disciplinary responses was higher in these two communities. Responses referring to the community model, on the other hand, were more common among informants from the school which had passed through all the phases of the

transformation process (S2) (Ríos et al., 2013).

Solutions that foster supervised dialog through mediation generally depend on the presence of an adult (usually a member of the teaching staff) who fulfills the role of mediator. From this point, schools evolve towards a more autonomous, student-led method (Mayes & Cohen, 2003), although they may still depend on the adult figure or “expert” (Flecha & García, 2007). In this study, we observed that S2, which had completed the transformation, had made greater headway towards implementing more autonomous student-led solutions, although the statements made by informants from the other two schools attested to the fact that they also are making a concerted effort to move towards the community model.

The solutions reached using the community model focus on empathy, active listening, experience-based knowledge, respect and trust, all of which enable people within the community to assume joint responsibility for resolving any conflicts (Flecha & García, 2007; Oliver, 2014; Padrós, 2014; Padrós et al., 2011). Conflicts generate learning opportunities which help foster peaceful coexistence. Thus, potentially tense moments become situations filled with educational possibilities (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Tellado et al., 2013). Moreover, Learning

Communities manage to prevent the majority of potential conflicts, since rules that have been discussed with students and established on the basis of consensus give better results and help children internalize values and regulate their own behavior (Campo et al., 2005; Mayes & Cohen, 2003). Both the two schools immersed in the transformation process and the one which had completed it revealed elements of the community approach in their references to the conflict resolution methods used, although to differing degrees.

Analyzing the way in which conflicts are resolved by listening to members of three learning communities has enabled us to identify the weaknesses present in each, which in turn enables us to help them raise awareness and take decisions designed to improve peaceful coexistence, as postulated by Jaussi and Luna (2002). In this sense, the study highlights the fact that students feel better when they feel acknowledged and listened to (Flecha et al., 2011), and that dialog between peers leads to a recognition of the person speaking and a better chance of them being heard. It also gives rise to a better atmosphere in the school, which in turn helps prevent conflict (Padrós, 2014), and all this is attained in greater measure as schools move through the different stages of the process designed to transform them into Learning Communities.

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