


Coexistence Training: The Role of Mediation in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study is to propose a training plan that supports the transformation of aggressive behaviors into learning opportunities through a program of school mediation and educational projects. **Method:** A qualitative methodology and a comprehensive-interpretative approach were applied to work with the material obtained from documentary sources, participant observations, and surveys applied to 28 students, 18 teachers, principals, and school guidance counselor of a public education institution in the city of Barranquilla. **Results:** It was found that the largest number of conflicts happen in the classroom and that although the institution has a committee of coexistence and the figure of the school mediator, these entities are not summoned promptly for their solution and a training plan for mediators is lacking. **Conclusion:** A training program in coexistence and in continuous school mediation is proposed involving all members of the educational community and the committee of coexistence. The program includes to open formal spaces for dialogue and initiate processes of exploration and formation of individuals according to their abilities and needs through the development of artistic, sports, and democratic projects and through teaching management of emotions with recreational workshops.

Keywords: School coexistence, conflict, mediation, aggression, training.

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Introduction

The gradual and constant increase in conflicts in the school setting is of special concern, indicating that the current resources implemented for their management must be reviewed and updated. As a result of these rising conflicts and their complexity, multiple national and international studies have been conducted, including varying proposals whose goal is to enhance their management. Specifically in Colombia, while progress has been made and Law 1620 was passed ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2013](#)), in addition to the Educational Handbook for School Coexistence (2013) and [Bill No. 181 \(2016\)](#) to set School Mediation as support for educational institutes as regards coexistence, this problem still remains to be more extensively addressed through the employment of different instruments.

In Las Flores de Barranquilla District Institute of Education (IED, for its Spanish acronym), multiple situations affecting peaceful living and regular classes take place on a daily basis. This institution is located in a disadvantaged region with high levels of insecurity, prostitution, micro-trafficking, apart from the fact that a large part of children come from dysfunctional families dealing with many conflicts that indirectly enter the classroom. Even though the causes of conflicts are multiple and multidimensional ([Rodríguez, 2007](#)), these factors directly impact the students' behavior. [Vaello \(2006\)](#) attributed a huge part of conflicts to the lack of socio-emotional competences, appealing to compensate for said shortages with great planning. In turn, [Vinyamata \(2005\)](#) stated that if the cause of conflicts fails to be understood, the chance of finding a solution is reduced.

As a way to successfully understand the factors that mostly influence the origin of disputes and aggressive verbal interactions, which are really frequent in the context under study, this research aims at finding their causes and developing specific plans to favor the students' coexistence training for building more harmonic relationships.

The interviews conducted with students show that the classroom is the greatest area of conflict (Table 1).

Table 1. Places where conflicts between students occur

Nº	PLACES WHERE CONFLICTS ARISE BETWEEN STUDENTS
1	Classroom
2	Schoolyard/Breaks
3	Corridors
4	Entrance/Exit
5	Bathroom

Source: Interview on the students' perception of conflicts and their setting

Table 1 indicates that, although the classroom is considered the place where multiple competencies are developed, it is also the setting of a wide range of conflicts, and this reality requires managing them as part of school work.

If we consider that coexistence and conflict go hand in hand, avoiding the responsibility of confronting it is not an option since, as [Rodríguez \(2007\)](#) asserted, "the only thing that certainly does not help solve conflicts is doing nothing about them" (p. 7). It is thus imperative to consider each conflict as a useful opportunity to educate their actors in a systematic and constant manner and, therefore, turn the aggressive behaviors of students into learning possibilities ([Vaello, 2006](#); [Binaburo, 2007](#); [Bernal & Saker, 2013](#)).

In the light of these perspectives, the objective is to promote healthy coexistence among students and their peaceful living with the rest of the members of the educational community through a training program including different components aimed at preventing and solving conflicts. According to Galtun (as cited in [Caballero, 2010](#)), the incorporation of these elements seeks to regard conflict as a driver of change at the personal and social levels, rather than as a negative aspect.

Similarly, [Bernal & Saker \(2013\)](#) claimed that conflict represents an opportunity to generate different lessons learned and develop skills of various types, such as communicative and mediating abilities.

In this context, this study seeks to become a significant contribution not only to provide an ultimate solution but also several effective tools that improve the coexistence of Las Flores IED, thereby successfully helping students begin their training to be conflict-solving citizens.

Theoretical framework

The referents considered in this article and substantiating this research are as follows: conflict, school coexistence, verbal interaction, and mediation. These terms also define the categories that have been included in the research work they are part of.

Conflict

Conflict arises as a natural part of interpersonal relationships. It is hard to conceive the interactions of individuals without conflict. Pardo (2014) considered that "conflict is an inevitable part of the process of growth and development of every social group and human being" (p. 1). Furthermore, conflict "is part of life and affects every aspect of it" (Castells, 1998, p. 1, in Rodríguez, 2007). Any discrepancy regarding the interests, opinions, and needs or any kind of incompatibility will lead to an opportunity for disagreement or argument (Arellano, 2007). It is therefore important to turn to a wide range of actions and methods that help channel each conflicting situation so that they result in positive agreements between the actors involved.

Vinyamata (as cited in Caballero, 2010, p. 155) ensured that "conflicts are the driving force and expression of human relations. Conflict is a sign of diversity; each individual has his/her own opinion, experience, or emotion that will not always be in line with those of others, and the way he/she deals with them will define his/her transformation. Said plurality is present in the daily relationships between students in the school setting, where conflicts invigorate a large part of the interactions typical of this context." In this regard, the abovementioned Vinyamata (2005) indicated the need to attempt to understand conflicts in terms of their causes and origins as a consistent way to turn them into opportunities for improvement.

Furthermore, the term "school conflict" has different connotations associated with violence. In the school setting, many conflicts lead to some degree of violence, but understanding education without conflicts is inconceivable (Rodríguez, 2007). As per Pacheco (2014), the emergence of aggressive behaviors between adolescents is a widespread problem at school, involving a negative impact in the school environment. However, he also stated that our approach to these behaviors, which may be temporary, can help children learn to overcome several of their challenges.

According to Ghiso & Ospina (as cited in Ramírez & Arcila, 2013), "the violent context is already part of the school culture and the day-to-day life of principals, teachers and youth, so it goes unnoticed and not acknowledged as violent events" (p. 419). But despite conflicts are present in every context and whenever two people interact, no type of verbal or physical confrontation of greater or less relevance should be considered natural at school. On the contrary, each event requires further study and use for the purposes of training their actors and imparting lessons from this experience.

As per [Villalba \(2015\)](#), conflicts are perceived “as parts of the social process that is inherent to every peaceful living” (p. 94). In his analysis, conflicts should not be regarded as problems, and their positive management may help build a culture of peace.

School has the fundamental duty of fostering good relationships between all its members through prevention programs that minimize the potential for minor conflicts to result in more severe forms of violence. So, it seems to be generally agreed that conflicts in school settings should be considered opportunities to train those involved in different skills, such as mediation, communication, and citizenship competencies.

School coexistence

Rodríguez (2007) defined coexistence as “living with each other on the basis of given social relationships and codes, within a specific social context” (p. 1). School coexistence has all these elements and features as it includes a system of relationships, a context and a system of codes, the latter understood as behavioral patterns and as language usage. [Ocampo et al. \(2009\)](#) suggested that “cohabitation involves living your life in the company of others; likewise, it assumes that the existing harmony in it seeks a shared space to perceive development that does not limit others.” Said vision presumes that the relationships built in shared spaces and activities should develop under conditions of freedom.

According to other authors, coexistence “is a personal and social construction whose goal is to create a common world, for which it is necessary to experience values such as equity, justice, acceptance, respect, trust and pluralism, among others” ([Pérez, 2002](#), [Maturana, 2001](#), [Mockus, 2002](#), in [Díaz & Sime, 2016](#), p. 127). This last perspective considers that cohabitation leads to a system of mutually responsive relationships between individuals based on respect. In the school context, this involves the interpersonal relationships between all members of an education community, which impacts the students’ affective, cognitive, and social development.

Coexistence can also be defined as “the action of living with others, sharing activities and dialogue, under rules and standards based on mutual respect, understanding and ethical reciprocity” ([Ortega, 2003](#) in [Espinoza et al., 2010](#), p. 19). This concept allows us to value the importance of dialogue and respect as tools to interact and make agreements in opposition to the use of unfriendly language and the violation of rules, which may lead to confrontation.

Ferrero (as cited in [Arancibia, 2014](#)) stated that "coexistence is the reflection of a diverse reality, in which we interact with individuals with interests and needs different to ours; thus, a challenge for schools is to educate in human rights and coexistence" (p. 5). Undoubtedly, schools should take on this challenge in a planned way, based on their syllabus, and transversally, so that all cases, without exception, support transforming the conflict arisen from diversity between individuals in new opportunities of learning, which lead to scenarios where harmonic relationships prevail.

[Villalba \(2016\)](#) revealed that today's educational practices have neglected learning how to learn to be and coexist, which has resulted in the predomination of penalties rather than other more creative methods that discourage the culture of violence. In his analysis, Villalba suggested alternatives that seek to build more democratic spaces and put our values, teams, mediation, and emotional education, among other alternatives, into practice.

"Peaceful coexistence is a way of living that demands learning to practice it since, as any other way to live, it is a result of learning" ([MEN, 2005, p. 1](#)). Schools play many roles, and one of the most crucial ones involves promoting peaceful living among all of its members, thereby achieving a healthy coexistence. Thus, their setting may offer multiple examples that help build, promote, and teach a system of values and behavioral patterns.

[Vásquez \(2012\)](#) introduced the notions of good treatment and emotional intelligence in the management of interpersonal relations in all contexts as focal points to promote an environment of acceptance and respect that may result in more harmonious relationships. This clearly applies to the school context, where the exercise of putting oneself in others' shoes to understand how they feel and gaining skills to self-regulate emotions lead to improved coexistence.

[Díaz & Sime \(2016\)](#) claimed that nowadays, school coexistence is the subject of study and a central theme that concerns international bodies given the difficulty in addressing it. In this sense, according to [Unesco \(2008\)](#), educational programs do not consider coexistence as a focal point that would be helpful to achieve multiple learning goals.

In view of the above, the authors of this work propose three rationales to legitimize the study of school coexistence and highlight the need to assume it as the central topic of educational policies. These lines are linked to the emergence of different forms of violence at school, their impact in learning, and the demands of the society to reduce violence and

insecurity in the various settings.

In fact, the Colombian Ministry of National Education (MEN, 2005) has made laws, decrees, agreements, international partnerships, among other mechanisms, as detailed in the document called Educational Policy for School Coexistence Training (2005). More recently, Law 1620 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2013) was made for strengthening educational institutions in training processes that promote values and the proper handling of conflicts, showing our growing increase in this regard.

Whenever situations affecting good relationships take place at school, authorities should take advantage of them to encourage learning about coexistence and qualify the social relations across the educational community. We have the social responsibility of promoting a change of attitude among our students to adopt more peaceful attitudes toward the divergence of views, preferences, and beliefs in such a way that they are evident not only in the school environment but in every sphere of their lives.

School mediation

Nowadays, the term "school mediation" is widely used in the educational context in view of the rising conflicts, the lack of negotiating skills, and the need to mitigate or solve problems. There is a wide array of definitions used for this term, and this article mentions some of the most important ones in an attempt to approach understanding. As per the Board of Education of the Regional Government of Andalusia (2009), for instance, "school mediation is a dispute resolution method applicable to situations in which the parties have reached a point in which communication between them is blocked and, therefore, they fail to attempt to solve their disagreements through direct negotiation" (p. 5). Given the recurrence of the situations in which students become absorbed in their points of view, as well as those cases in which the communication channels are ineffective and they are incapable of reaching agreements by themselves, having a formal mediation program available at school is really helpful in such circumstances.

According to Calderón (2011), mediation is "a cooperative conflict solving process" (p. 44), which implies that the parties involved show their wish to take part in and their will to reach an agreement. Pérez (2002) believed that mediation requires the involvement of a neutral third party with negotiating skills so that the actors of the conflict look for authentic possible solutions. This neutral third party, known as the mediator, is chosen by them, and the solution reached can never be imposed by him/her (Torrego, 2000). De

Prada & López (2008) explained that the intervention of a mediator helps improve communication, so it is the basis for a lesson to be learnt. The communication process required during mediation uses dialogue as a crucial element, given its contribution to the enhanced relationships between the parties involved, as well as a tool that facilitates reaching agreements between the parties in conflict per se (Calderón, 2011).

The school mediation method specifically stands out for having its own characteristics, such as its peaceful, voluntary, and confidential nature, its enhancement of collaboration and communication, its training and transformative character, and the fact that it is a process that can be developed in different stages (De Prada & López, 2008). As can be seen, the benefits that may be obtained from the resolution of school conflicts through a mediation program are significant. However, this tool requires being part of a formal and continuous project for enhanced coexistence, in which every strata of an institution must take part in (De Prada, 2014). Although the latter is hard to achieve, it is a key element that may help the mediation process become a permanent element in the educational establishment where it operates. Another aspect to consider for the effectiveness of the mediation program is the type of conflict to be dealt with for distinguishing it from those constituting serious misconducts or crimes, which will therefore require other type of management.

According to De Prada & López (2008), “there are as many models of mediation as there are mediators” (p. 102). Nonetheless, most of these models have been adopted in different environments, including education, inspired by three major schools of thought:

- The Traditional-Linear Harvard model
- The Transformative model
- The Circular-Narrative model

In any case, these are not the only existing mediation models. There is a broad variety of mediation forms that tend to be referred to as the Institutionalized Mediation, the External Mediation, Spontaneous Mediation, Adult-Led Mediation, Peer Mediation, and Co-mediation (De Prada & López, 2008). However, the selection and implementation of a given model must agree with the characteristics of the context it will be applied to. In this regard, Torrego (2006) suggested three mediation lines: the punitive model, the relational model, and the integrated model. As for the latter, Caramés et al. (2010) highlighted that “mediation is part of the integrated model to enhance coexistence” (p. 4) and explained that this model makes use of the advantages of the punitive and relational models, whose

grounds are based on reparation, reconciliation, and resolution. Regardless of the model adopted, the mediation strategy has been proving its great contribution, thanks to its training character through which the actors of conflicts must acquire a new view of their management.

Verbal interaction

A great variety of interactions and exchanges take place in the classroom between its actors: teachers and students. The use of language constitutes the essential element of communication through which both actors construct meanings, and this relationship gives rise to verbal interaction. Moreover, the quality of the classroom environment is closely linked to the concurrence of different factors, including the type of verbal interaction resulting from the interplay both among students and between them and their teachers.

Jaimes (as cited in [Osuna, 2016](#)) understood verbal interaction “as the encounter between people who share a physical space and influence each other; this way, the mutual action is a process of coming and going, from meanings of their own and reconstructed between one and the other” (p. 24). This type of interaction is also characteristic of the school setting, where language is a key element of contact, and the tool to share and negotiate meanings they are constructed for different purposes.

According to [Castañeda \(2011\)](#), “verbal interaction explicitly refers to the communication activity carried out by more than two individuals through verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal means of communication, guided towards a specific goal, produced in particular social and cultural situations, and governed by a set of linguistic, social and cultural norms” (p. 61). When conflicting situations arise at school, all these elements are present in the students’ discourse, and through that, their stances are expressed based on their beliefs and rules, generally making use of aggressive and rude words accompanied by gestures and the tone and volume of their voice, among other elements, that encourage confrontation rather than agreement.

[Rocha \(2003\)](#) claimed that “communication is present in arguments, and it can be said that arguments constitute a communication process. Likewise, a mediation will entail that too, and reaching an agreement involves that as well” (pp. 65, 66). This statement suggests the importance of the language used in conflict situations since they originate and up to its potential resolution. Language is at the core of conflict, and the choice of words, expressions, and the loudness of our voice, among others, used in each interaction

sets the tone and direction not only of the argument but also of the mediation and agreement that said verbal interactions may give rise to.

The use of aggressive and rude expressions in the students' discourse during conflict situations is increasingly frequent. In this type of situation, the aim of language is to threaten, murmur, and insult, as well as to gossip and agitate others, thus hampering the normal development of educational processes (Benavides, 2010). In contrast to aggressive language, Osuna (2016) suggested the need and the positive impact of polite language for conflict resolution purposes. To that end, he explained that orality "gives rise to basic concepts such as verbal interaction and politeness" (p. 47), describing them as elements that, when combined, contribute to their resolution.

Based on these perspectives, verbal interaction plays a dual role in the communication activities typical of the classroom. The language used in interactions during conflict situations can be aggressive and provoking; nonetheless, orality and politeness in language can benefit the path toward dispute resolution.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method with a comprehensive-interpretative approach, as this paradigm facilitates the theorization of the behaviors observed and the discovery of their meaning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 students from different secondary school grades, followed by participant observation applied to 28 students attending sixth year, both inside and outside the classroom since, through this technique, "spontaneous situations are the source of information, with the researcher being the main data gathering instrument" (Amezcuca, 2000, p. 31). Information was also taken from students' anecdotes and surveys applied to 18 teachers, two school administrators, and one counselor.

The technique used to select students for the interview, regarding their perception of school conflicts, their types, and management, was purposive sampling, prioritizing groups of students who met a defined criterion: their recurring active or passive involvement in conflicts as well as their age, gender, and grade.

Each of the instruments applied delved into the following criteria:

- Modalities, motivations, frequency, and places of occurrence of conflicts
- Attitude and procedures implemented when faced with aggressive behaviors
- Perception of the school environment
- Acknowledgment of active or passive involvement in conflict situations
- Effectiveness of the current resources for managing coexistence-related problems
- Intent to improve the procedures and receive school mediation training

The information obtained from this study has been entered in the form of tables using statistical charts to facilitate its interpretation, develop an analysis, and draw conclusions. The above seeks to provide a broad view on the current situation of Las Flores IED in terms of conflict to implement a comprehensive training and school mediation program consistent with the coexistence policies established by the Ministry of National Education through the School Coexistence Act and the School Mediation Program.

Results

Below is a preliminary summary of the most relevant findings obtained by this work based on categories that are the result of the interviews with students and confirmed through their triangulation with the analysis of the collection of anecdotes and participant observation.

In the category including the most frequent forms of conflict among the institution's 6th grade students, the participants highlighted the behaviors detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Forms of conflict.

No.	FORMS OF CONFLICT
1	Taking off, hiding or taking their peers' belongings without permission
2	Insults, use of disparaging nicknames
3	Any type of physical aggression: shoves, kicks, fights
4	Damaging personal belongings
5	Threatening, blackmailing, forcing someone to do something

Source: Interviews with students about types of conflicts, their frequency and causes.

Table 2 indicates that the modality causing the greatest number of conflicts between students has to do with taking away or hiding their belongings, followed by being the object of insults and pejorative nicknames. Finally, they indicate being involved in some kind of physical aggression (tripping somebody up, pushing, hitting). This result offers a glimpse into the type of behaviors present in the classroom context that deserve special analysis.

Table 3. Frequency of conflicts.

N°	FREQUENCY OF CONFLICTS
1	Everyday

2	Usually
3	Rarely
0	Hardly ever
0	Never

Source: Interviews with students about types of conflicts, their frequency and causes.

Table 3 includes the results associated with the frequency of aggressions (insults, kicks, discrimination, theft, nicknaming, among others). In this sense, students claim these aggressions take place on a daily basis, a result that reflects the daily school environment and the level at which it affects students in class.

Table 4. Reasons for aggression

N°	REASONS FOR AGGRESSION
1	As a joke
2	Because I am weak
2	Because almost nobody likes me
3	Because I am a good student
3	Because I get annoyed quickly
3	Other reason. For my physical traits (height, build, use of glasses, skin color)

Source: Questionnaire applied to students about types of conflicts, their frequency and causes

Table 4 indicates that most aggressions begin as jokes, some of which evolve into major or repeated conflicts. A conflict's characteristics and frequency give rise to a negative atmosphere at school, indiscipline, and consequences such as low performance, disciplinary punishments in writing, and suspension from academic activities.

Discussion

The results described above show important aspects for reflection. First, dealing with the possibility of being exposed daily to a conflict related to their personal belongings creates an environment of distrust among students. This factor leads to the need to develop spaces to foster coexistence, reflection, group games, and role-play as well as to rely on a project founded on strong values that promote opportunities to share and know their peers more in detail and, in short, to contribute to the generation of an environment of greater trust.

Furthermore, these results suggest the need to take action in a planned and orderly way from the syllabus for dynamizing the dialogue processes between all the members of the community that result in enhanced coexistence between students, as [Bernal & Saker \(2013\)](#) suggested. Creating more spaces for dialogue and promoting good treatment, as well as the implementation of polite language, are tools to consider for the attainment of this goal.

Furthermore, the frequency of occurrence of conflict behaviors and being “object of practical jokes” indicate that the school atmosphere provides neither a suitable environment nor the security for the academic processes to develop normally. In this context, it is therefore imperative to propose strategies to handle the aggression and stress that students feel when they suffer from this type of experiences as well as to design and include emotional intelligence teaching. In addition, recreational and art workshops are a great alternative to channel rude attitudes into more productive activities.

Conclusions

The analysis of the results described lead to the following conclusions:

Opening formal spaces for dialogue and conflict analysis is the priority, in addition to specific plans to train mediators; a task endeavored to the Ministry of Education.

Individuals are required to initiate exploration and training processes based on their skills and needs to turn their aggressive attitudes into the development of art, sports, and democratic projects.

An incentive should be created for the active involvement of school administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students through the bodies established, such as the Community Committee, School for Parents, School Mediation, and training programs should be developed and promoted from the syllabus in such a way that, alongside the School Coexistence Act, the school becomes a place of healthy coexistence.

As the social system it is, school needs to commit to carrying out teaching and socialization training processes across all of its strata and playing the crucial role of teaching youth to interact with others, that is, to share and live together in a healthy way (Rojas, as cited in [Ocampo et al., 2009](#)).

Finally, it is clear that although the countless research studies conducted on school coexistence and the acts proposed for legislation have already made valuable contributions, a more systematic work is further required to help prevent and solve conflicts in our classrooms.

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