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**PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICTS IN
SCHOOL APPLICATIONS FOR PRIMARY CLASSES**

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Abstract

Conflicts are often identified in school environment, in various forms of manifestation, with perhaps too few ways of preventing, solving, managing, and having far too many negative effects when dysfunctional. The subject is justified precisely by the actual phenomenology of conflicts among young, primary school students. As educational factors, the teachers can prevent and solve school conflicts in an optimal way, exploring their functional and formative dimension in what concerns the relationship of the students with each other, with the family, but also with the educational institution. Our study presents various definitions of conflict, then captures its significance and specific dynamics, and proposes a set of specific principles, together with a methodology for mediation and negotiation. The typology of conflicts sources highlights the specificity of conflict situations among primary school students. As a natural continuation of our investigative approach, we propose a set of specific strategies and models that can be used for resolving conflict situations. At the same time, the paper provides a bivalent view of conflicts, mediation and conflict negotiation processes by presenting the advantages and disadvantages they face. Finally, the study focuses on the teacher's role in conflict management between students.

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1. Introduction

The success of educational activities in school is often influenced, in a decisive manner, by the characteristics of the relational and communication climate in the school environment.

Every teacher should make a constant effort to prevent and solve conflicts between students, using strategies specific to conflict management and educational communication. An educator must pay more attention to the group of students in order to get to know each one from the perspective of physical, psychological, emotional development and interpersonal relationships they have.

A complex and individualized approach throughout first years of school will help the educator to identify early conflicts in the students' interpersonal relationships and to effectively and continuously adapt teaching as well as classroom management actions. It is important that every teacher practicing in primary school to know, to acquire and to be able to apply the most effective conflict management strategies in the daily school activities, in correspondence with the theories of the specialists in this field.

2. Problem Statement

The lexeme "*conflict*" originates from the Latin "*conflictus,-us*", with a direct reference to "*confligere*", translated as "*collide, strike*". Most dictionaries and encyclopaedias reflect a traditional view of the conflict, defining it by terms similar to violence, tension, friction, dispute, quarrelling, scandal, war, but violence is just one the directions in which conflict manifests.

2.1. The significance of conflict. A theoretical approach

- From a philosophical perspective, conflict is an acute stage in the evolution of antagonistic contradictions. In this regard, according to Wilson and Hanna (1990) the conflict is "a struggle involving ideas, values and or limited resources" (p. 225).
- Psychology specialists offer another perspective and treat the conflict through its own phenomenology, specifically on the basis of its internalized manifestation. So they define it in terms of tension and imbalance as a result of the orientation pressure of a person subjected simultaneously to opposite and equal tendencies: "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulses or motives" (Batubo, 2010, p. 395).
- The social perspective contributes to understanding the conflict as a natural part of life and as a factor of human progress. A relevant point of presents the conflict as "an engine of progress which transcends so many areas of life" (Otite & Albert, 1999, p.1).

These visions are correlated with the perspective of educational theorists and practitioners. The conflict is also part of school reality where both teachers and students experience its dynamics at the level of every day interactions. It is an accepted reality even in the early years of formal education, the conflict being an expected and wanted part of pre-schoolers social development.

2.2. Taxonomies of conflict-generating sources in primary school students

Intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts envision a reality of personal and social life.

First of all, it is important to know a more general taxonomy of sources that generate conflicts. Speciality literature advances several classifications, but we will focus on our study on the one proposed

by Bocoș, Gavra, & Marcu (2008, p. 15). So, the main sources are: violation of fundamental human needs, different moral, social and professional values, different perceptions of reality, different interests that cause distinct concerns, explanations and reasoning, limited resources and altering some psychological needs.

Secondly, these generic sources become objectified by various risk factors at distinct levels. We will refer to these levels and to associated risk factors, by offering, from our point of view, references to students in primary school: (Table 01).

- Risk factors at individual level
- Risk factors at family level
- Risk factors at community level

Table 01. Risk factors conflicts between students in primary school

Individual level	Family level	Community level -risk factors related to the group of friends	Community level -risk factors related to the educational institutions
-personality traits such as aggression or impulsivity; -deficiencies of self-control mechanisms; -lack of self-esteem; -the need to attract attention and respect; -personal history as a victim of abuse; -neglect in early childhood; -witnesses to domestic violence;	-the existence of a defective socio-emotional family climate; -lack ethical, moral, socio-professional, religious, affective family patterns; -the low level of parenting education; -lack of information, training and education in the role of parent; -delegating parents' responsibilities for educating the child to school; -considerably diminishing of parents' authority in relation to their child; -the crisis of family values;	-reproducing some attitudes or behaviours learned in the group of friends; -the influence of friends at the same time with the release of parental supervision;	-the opposition between teacher culture and student culture; -distance in communication; -perpetuating dependency relationships and subordination of students to teacher; -limited opportunities for students to communicate to each other in the learning process; -excess of disciplinary measures, unequal sanctions or penalties; -non-adaptation of pedagogical practices to the needs and specific of the new generations of students.

3. Research Questions

The experimental research that we propose has the theme *The impact of the Peer Mediation program in mediating conflicts at primary school students level* and is an action research.

3.1. The focus of the research questions

Our investigative process was based on research questions related to conflict phenomenon in the school environment and to an experimental program in mediating conflicts between students, according to a Peer Mediation format.

3.2. Inventory of research questions

The following questions were raised for the study:

- Which are the most common causes of conflicts between students in primary classes?

- Which are the preventive and ameliorative intervention strategies most frequently used in conflict management in school environment?
- Which are the formative and informative valences of a conflict peer-mediation program, with concrete applications for primary classes?

According to these questions we have developed the purpose, the objectives, the hypothesis and the methodological structure of this research.

4. Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the research was to conduct a theoretical investigation on the phenomenon of conflict in the school environment, from the perspective of its causality, processuality, typology, prevention and management, and then elaborate, implement and validate an experimental program to mediate conflicts between Romanian primary school students, on the basis of the Peer Mediation format.

4.1. General research objectives

- Presenting the phenomenology and the dynamics of conflicts in the context of the relationships of primary school students;
- Highlighting some factors in the school environment that influence interpersonal relationships, social integration of students in class-groups, students' educational paths and their affective dimension;
- Investigating the formative impact of the Peer Mediation program for Romanian students in primary school.

4.2. Specific research objectives

- Evaluating the communicational climate in the school environment both from the students' perspective and from the perspective of teachers;
- Identifying differences in conflict management style that educators adopt in dealing with conflicts between students;
- Identifying the main causes for peer-conflicts and the willingness of each party to get involved in remedying them;
- Recording, monitoring and comparing the effects obtained for students in experimental classes, using management strategies based on mediation and negotiation, and for students from classes in which there was no experimental intervention.

4.3. Research hypothesis and variables

As researchers, we intended to verify the following hypothesis:

The implementation of a Peer Mediation program based on strategies to prevent, mediate and negotiate students' conflicts in primary experimental classes will lead to a significant reduction of conflict situations, facilitate students' social integration and improve their educational paths.

Our research has the following variables:

- The independent variable:

I.V.: The implementation of a Peer Mediation program based on strategies to prevent, mediate and negotiate students' conflicts in primary experimental classes

- The dependent variables:

- D.V. 1: the number of conflict situations will be reduced;

- D.V. 2: the social integration of students will be facilitated;

- D.V. 3: the students' educational paths will be improved;

- Moderator variable:

- M.V.: the biological gene of students

- External variables:

- E.V. 1: the number of students in the class;

- E.V. 2: the participation of some students in individual psychological counselling sessions.

5. Research Methods

We underline a synthetic presentation of the research methods used to verify the dependent variables from the experimental research.

5.1. Pre-experimental and post-experimental stages of the research

The same research methods and tools have been applied both in experimental and control classes, with 60 students (age 7-9) per group, and involving teachers from primary classes.

So, we have opted for sociometric methods in order to find the degree of cohesion of the class-groups illustrated by the number of attractions, rejections or peer-conflicts expressed by the students in sociometric tests and noted in sociometric matrices. "The sociometric test is a research tool composed of a set of questions that ask the investigated subjects to express their socio-emotional preferences, feelings of sympathy and antipathy towards the group members they belong to (group-class)" (Bocoș, 2007, p.120).

We also used the interview method and systematic observation to evaluate the intra-group relational climate. These methods were useful to monitor and centralize the frequency of conflicts that occurred between students in a specific period of time – one month for each stage.

In a complementary way, we applied the method of questionnaire survey for teachers in order to highlight their style of conflict management before and after the Peer Mediation program, both in experimental and control classes.

5.2. The experimental stage of the research

The main method used in this stage was the pedagogical experiment and it was conducted for six months, in the Peer Mediation program for students from primary classes, constructed by us and well founded on the following ideational axis:

- Applying this method and running the associated program allowed the students to be the ones who mediate conflicts between them and not the teachers. These students have been accustomed to dealing with conflict resolution immediately after its appearance, by offering to parties involved the opportunity to negotiate a solution and to reconcile.

- The researchers carefully monitored the application of this method especially in the early stage of the program, after which the students got more autonomy and the teachers intervened only when the conflict situations seemed to be too difficult for the students.

During the experiment we continued to use the method of systematic observation.

6. Findings

The effectiveness of this research action was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were collected and noted using sociometric matrices, observation and monitoring grids, SWOT analysis, graphs and diagrams.

6.1. Findings regarding primary school students

During and after the formative intervention, the students from experimental classes made real progress in harmonizing the communication relations between them and the cohesion of the membership group improved.

By comparing the results obtained at the level of the experimental group of students with the results obtained at the level of the control group, where the formative intervention did not exist, the first group is distinguished by a considerable difference in the students' availability for assertive communication, for collaboration and the mutual understanding of each other and the needs of others, but also by a diminishing of conflicting states.

At the end of the Peer Mediation program, attractions and rejections expressed by students in sociometric tests had a better distribution than in the pre-experimental stage. We have noticed more balanced relationships between students in primary experimental classes, without any absolute exclusion of any student, better intragroup cohesion and reduction in the number and intensity of conflicts, as a result of the mediation and negotiation processes in peer-conflicts.

6.2. Findings regarding primary school teachers

The results obtained from the testing of primary school teachers reveal that, in the case of prevention and management of conflicts between students, the collaborative negotiation style is predominant, but there is also a high proportion of conflict management styles based on conciliation and compromise (Figure 01.).

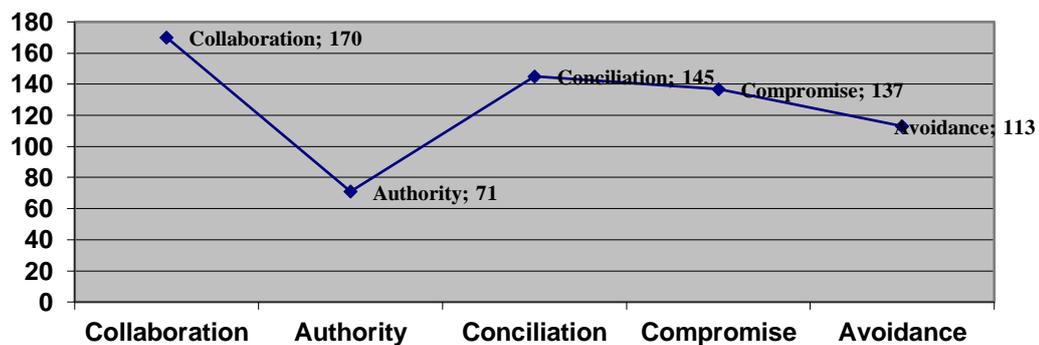


Figure 01. Conflict management and negotiation styles adopted by primary school teachers

7. Conclusion

As a result of the researchers' educational intervention, there were favourable changes for the social integration of many students involved in the experiment (Table 02. and Table 03.), but especially for the prevention, management and diminishing of the conflicts between students.

Affective, social and educational development of primary classes' students are improved and maintained at a high-quality level in terms of positive social inclusion, based on collaboration, conflict peer mediation, negotiation of the solutions, mutual understanding and assertive communication.

In order to prevent, manage or even constructively use conflicts founded in the school environment, in the specific situation of primary education, it is imperative for educators to understand the mechanisms of their emergence and development, and to select effective management applications adapted to their classes.

Table 02. Example of attractions and rejections distribution between students from an experimental primary class – before experiment

Students	A.G	B.R	B.D	C.R	C.D	F.V	M.M	M.C	P.L	P.A	P.F	R.N	Ș.M	T.T	T.P
A.G.	▶			+		+				-					
B.R.		▶	-				+	+						-	
B.D.			▶					-		+	+			-	
C.R.			-	▶	-		+							+	
C.D.			-		▶				+				+		-
F.V.	+				-	▶		-				+			
M.M.		+					▶				-	+		-	
M.C.		+	-			+	-	▶							
P.L.			-				-		▶	+			+		
P.A.							-	-	+	▶			+		
P.F.		+			-						▶	+	-		
R.N.		+	-		-						+	▶			
Ș.M.							-	-	+	+			▶		
T.T.		+	-				+					-		▶	
T.P.							-	-				+		+	▶
A/R	1/0	5/0	0/8	1/0	0/4	2/0	3/5	1/5	3/0	3/1	2/1	4/1	3/1	2/3	0/1

Table 03. Example of attractions and rejections distribution between students from an experimental primary class – after experiment

Students	A.G	B.R	B.D	C.R	C.D	F.V	M.M	M.C	P.L	P.A	P.F	R.N	Ș.M	T.T	T.P
A.G.	▶		-	+		+				-					
B.R.		▶					+	+	-					-	
B.D.			▶					-		+	+			-	
C.R.			-	▶	-		+							+	
C.D.			-		▶				+				+		-
F.V.	+				-	▶		-				+			
M.M.	+	+					▶				-			-	
M.C.		+	-			+	-	▶							
P.L.							-		▶	+			+		-
P.A.							-	-	+	▶					+
P.F.			+			-					▶	+	-		
R.N.		+		-	-						+	▶			
Ș.M.							-	-	+	+			▶		
T.T.		+	-				+					-		▶	
T.P.							-	-				+		+	▶
A/R	2/0	4/0	1/5	1/1	0/3	2/1	3/5	1/5	3/1	3/1	2/1	3/1	2/1	2/3	1/2

We notice, based on these examples of social matrices, that 3 students from this experimental class have a better social inclusion after participating at Peer Mediation program.

Symbols: A – Attractions

R – Rejections

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