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

Laura García-Raga***, Roser Grau & Ramón López-Martín

* University of Valencia, Department of Theory of Education, Blasco Ibáñez, 30, 46010, Valencia, Spain.
& University of Valencia, Department of Comparative Education and History of Education, Blasco Ibáñez, 30, 46010, Valencia, Spain.

Abstract

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

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 651387440
E-mail address: laura.garcia@uv.es
Keywords: peer mediation; secondary school students; conflict resolution; evaluation; interpersonal relationships.

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

2. Objectives

This work presented here has the following aims:

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

3. Design and methodology

3.1 Sample

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

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

An *ad hoc* designed questionnaire has been used in order to collect the students’ views. For its design and drafting we have assumed the theoretical approaches and the educational purposes of school mediation highlighted by several authors previously mentioned and by the revision of other questionnaires associated with the subject (Ibarrola-Garcia & Iriarte, 2012, pp. 219-243).

After validation of its content (construct validity), it was submitted to review by 10 experts for its logical validation and pilot tested on 153 students from secondary public schools in Valencia for its empirical validation. Thus a final proposal of the questionnaire is presented, consisting of 66 items divided into: questions which all students must answer (items 1 to 19), questions which must be answered by the students who have attended mediation services (items 20 to 42), and questions only mediators must answer (items 43 to 66).

It is worth pointing out that this study presents the findings for the second part of the questionnaire (items 20 to 42). For questions related to the assessment of mediation all audiences have four types of Likert-type responses on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 for “strongly disagree”, 2 for “disagree”, 3 for “agree” and 4 for “strongly agree”).

3.3 Collection procedure and data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 19.0, has been used for the analysis of information. We have conducted a descriptive and inferential analysis of the data collected from each section of the questionnaire. With this study we intend to know the opinion and feedback given by the students who have attended mediation regarding all the components and dimensions of the mediation service offered at the educational centres. In addition, the provinces of Valencia, Castellon and Alicante have been compared by using the Mann-Whitney U test, once it had been established that the samples did not meet normalcy.

4. Findings

First of all, concerning training, it is worth stressing that 61.1% of the students who claim to have ever attended mediation have received training. In particular, the training received was on mentoring (38.6%), participating in workshops (13.9%), seminars (5.8%), or courses (13.9%), and/or attending conferences (14.2%).

Regarding the amount of mediation processes attended, 55% have participated in one single mediation process, 21% in two and the rest in three or more processes.

![Graph 1](attachment:image.png)

*Graphic 1. Comparison between provinces of the type of conflicts students attended mediation for*
In relation to the type of conflicts –bearing in mind that several options could be chosen–, two of them stand out: name-calling (58%) and rumours (34.5%). The least prominent cause was the one linked to cultural reasons, only chosen by 6% of the students. However, if we differentiate between Valencia, Castellon and Alicante, we notice that in Valencia, besides existing a greater amount of problems, there are three conflicts selected which are equal to or more than 40%: name-calling, rumours and threats; in Castellon only name-calling stands out (57%) from the rest, as in Alicante which has the highest percentage (62%).

The reasons for going to mediation are varied and only the need to solve a problem has the greatest percentage (41%), although there are differences between provinces: Valencia (selected by 33% of students) Castellon (selected by 43% of students) and Alicante (selected by 45% of students). On the other hand, the least important reason to participate in mediation is group exclusion, only selected by 3% of the students from Castellon and by 6% of the students from Alicante. Additionally, it should also be noted that in Valencia none of the reasons have a rating below 12% and the reason with the lowest percentage is “in order to obtain justice” (12.2%).

The answer to the question of who was the mediator(s) carrying out the mediation process also varies. If we analyze the information according to province, Valencia shows the highest percentage of students who say they had two students as mediators (32%), while in Castellon the percentage was 17%. Yet, at the same time, this last province has a greater number of students who chose the option of one single student as mediator (27%). In Alicante, on the contrary, the mediator was, on most occasions, a teacher (33%). The groups that participated less as mediators were “other people” (Valencia 6% and Alicante 9%) and “two teachers” (Castellon 8%).

Regarding the evaluation of the mediation process by the students who used mediation services, the highest scores are those related to the need of seeing more mediation processes in society (item 42; X=3.18) and to the satisfaction after having participated in the mediation process or processes (item 29; X=3.18). The next most important are: they would attend mediation again if a problem arose (item 40; X=3.15), recommending mediation to a friend (item 39; X=3.13) and mediation as a way to solve a problem (item 26; X=3.05). The lowest ratings are those relating mediation with keeping a problem secret (item 25; X=2.23) or seeing it as a way to avoid punishment (item 24; X=2.33).

Finally, if we consider the ratings of the three provinces, we can notice there are only significant differences in the following items: item 26 (.024), where participants had to indicate if mediation helped to solve a problem (X=2.84 in Valencia, and X=3.14 in Castellon and Alicante); item 29 (.034), related to the satisfaction after attending a mediation process (X=3.23 in Valencia, X=3.08 in Castellon, and X=3.22 in Alicante); item 30 (.000), which had to do with having learnt to listen to other people better (X=2.69 in Valencia, X=2.74 in Castellon, and X=3.15 in Alicante); item 33 (.019), regarding the understanding of others (X=2.68 in Valencia, X=2.69 in Castellon, and X=2.95 in Alicante); and item 34 (.018), related to self-knowledge (X=2.58 in Valencia, X=2.46 in Castellon, and X=2.86 in Alicante).
5. Conclusion and Discussion

Looking at our first intended objective of learning about the assessments by secondary school students on school mediation, we start by stressing that the participating students’ opinion has generally been very positive. The majority strongly agree on the usefulness of mediation within the school context because it helps to solve conflicts and, specifically, so that these conflicts do not result in critical and violent situations. According to the study by Villanueva, Usó & Adrián (2013), it can be said that mediation is presented as a preventive strategy to violent situations. Therefore, there are a large percentage of students who would recommend it to other students. These findings are also in line with those from other researches (Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Grande, 2010; Ibarrola-García & Iriarte, 2014; Moral & Pérez, 2010; and Torrego & Galán, 2008).

In stating the source of conflict which led to participants attending mediation, there is a quantitative predominance of forms of verbal abuse, whether name-calling or rumours. These are followed by forms of physical abuse or fights. Thirdly, disagreements and emotional rifts which are extremely present during adolescence, and finally, conflicts based on cultural differences have the lowest rating. All this data clearly points to direct violence, in its various forms, as the primary cause of conflicts among teenagers. There is no wonder that mediation, which works communication between the opposing parties (empathy, active listening, mutual dialogue, consensus, etc.), is effective for this type of situations. In this respect, it should be noted that there are studies which show that school mediation reduces aggressiveness (Jones, 2001) or verbal abuse (Farell, Myer & White, 2001).

Additionally, and based on our second objective of finding the weaknesses and strengths of mediation, it is noteworthy the fact that students consider mediation beneficial for society and that they would use it again if they had a problem in order to better understand other people’s point of view. Yet the data obtained show that not all students were trained (61.1%), which seems logical as the most widespread mediation model for secondary schools consists of only training those students who will be mediators and hence, only a small group among the students. Nevertheless, if we want to contribute to a culture of mediation which generates a better coexistence environment (García-Raga, Martín & Sahuquillo, 2012) we should provide training to all students.

Regarding our third objective, which was to identify the differences between the assessments offered by students of the three provinces, it appears that, on the whole, satisfaction is lower in Valencia than in Castellon and Alicante. Nonetheless, the benefits are evident in all three provinces from the students’ point of view, showing that the efficacy of mediation is obvious, at present, within the sphere of interpersonal relationships. Yet the truth is that the first thing unsolved conflicts damage is communication between those involved in a dispute and, thus, their relationship. The school is an ideal setting for young people to build friendships and positive social relationships with their peers, even though it requires the learning of a very important aspect: to be able to coexist with different ways of thinking, feeling, being and doing. In this respect, the main objectives of the mediation process are the reparation of damages and reconciliation or restoration of bonds between individuals. It seems, hence, that the findings of this study also point to the achievement of this second objective.

Ultimately and as a general summary, it has been shown that students consider school mediation beneficial and an opportunity that helps them manage their own conflicts. That is why the broad majority of the surveyed students recommend school mediation – a data that clearly indicates its positive reception –, yet we dare state that mediation has not achieved its full potential yet. Authors such as Ballard, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate & D’Onofrio (2011) claim that school mediation does not escape from the underuse that mediation also suffers in other contexts. At present, mediation is mostly used for solving conflicts between students without getting into issues more connected to conflicts or traditions deep-rooted in the school culture, which are a hidden source of conflicting situations. In this regard, we believe that the journey and the role of school mediation have only just started.

Finally, we would like to highlight that the sampling should be broadened for further analysis and other information gathering tools should be used together with the questionnaire. Also, assessments from other agents within the educational community should be taken into account in order to contrast the students’ opinions; thus conducting a more global and combined study for the analysis of the educational potentialities of mediation.
Acknowledgements

Project: “Evaluación de la mejora de la convivencia en los centros educativos a partir de la implantación de los proyectos de mediación”. [An assessment of the improvement of coexistence at schools after the introduction of mediation projects]. Reference: GV/2015/048. Funded by Conselleria d’Educació Cultura i Esport (Generalitat Valenciana) [Resolution of 9 June by the Director-General of University, Higher Education and Science, granting aid to the implementation of R&D projects for developing research groups]

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