

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THE RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS: SCHOOL MEDIATION

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1. Introduction:

The implementation of an Educational Mediation project –MEEDUCCO- with the objective of organising a School Mediation Service as a resource to work with Violence in this context requires an implication of each and every one of these groups.

Our experience has made us reach this conclusion after having implemented two work projects of Peer Mediation in a Secondary School (14-15-16 and 17 years of age) and in a Primary School (5-6-7-8-9-10-11 and 12 years of age).

To work with violence in schools with the application of Mediation as an alternative to the Resolution of conflicts implies a change of Paradigm, which means amongst other things to have clear some premisses such as:

- The term “conflict” as something positive, something that helps to grow and hence is evolution. Conflict forms a part of a process, it is not something instantaneous, rapid. The rhythm will be marked by the parties implicated in the conflict.

Conflicts in school produce despondency, a lowering of energy, an overload, understanding it as a lack of coexistence, of not doing what is adequate, it is a symptom of something that is going wrong, something that does not work. The consequences or the manner of facing it is looking for guilty parties, responsible parties so that they will answer for what they have done. We are predisposed for the unpleasantness before it even really exists. Faced with conflict, teachers take up many positions: they escape from it, they ignore it, they look for guilty parties, they make decisions on which is the most adequate solution (although they do not form part of said conflict, they are only, if it be the case, spectators), and at their best, they put down in writing what has happened.

- The responsibility of the parties of the conflict: It is not a third party with authority or power (depending on the cases) who does not form part of the conflict who is going to make the decision or to propose it to solve the conflict. If there exists a third party it may only co-ordinate the process of communication between the parties so that they can reach their own agreements and with these face the conflict.
- Mediation, as opposed to other alternatives, gives all the responsibility to the parties in conflict and tries, by means of its own work process, to achieve that said parties become responsible for themselves, for what they have produced, said, and felt, and that they are given the power to be themselves the protagonists of their own evolution, of their own agreements.

In this way, and in the case of the students, faced with a conflict between them, it is they and amongst themselves who are going to implement their own resources for the solution of the established conflict. This situation, from the school institution, implies giving a degree of power, responsibility, and confidence to the student that is not normal in Spanish schools.

It is the teachers, and amongst them the Directing Staff, who in most cases hold the power in schools. From their posts they believe that they are responsible and hence their omnipotence before all conflictual situations that arise. They feel they are responsible, and what they do not know, many times, is that it is not possible to have an answer to a process in which they do not take part.

Teachers can participate in the processes of methodology, of content established by programme, of adaptation of objectives to contents, of organisation of the school spaces, of programming out-of-school activities, of planning the School's Rules, etc. because they are part of them. But many circumstances arise in the school where teachers do not participate and where conflicts are generated; situations of conflict in which differences appear and it is necessary to integrate. However, the teachers enter as a protagonist in the resolution of said conflicts and nevertheless, we repeat, they are not an active part of them.

We believe that the fear amongst teachers of the fact that the reception of responsibility by the students and the students management capacity regarding conflicts becomes operational with the implementation of a peer mediation service is due fundamentally to the loss of power (not of authority) in the institution, as they give up a responsibility that although it is not theirs they have always assumed by tradition, the history of education, and custom.

Mediation is normally done in a space of the school in which only the mediators and those who are mediated participate, hence all are students. Teachers are not present in the mediation, nor can they control the process directly. This implies a confidence in the students who carry it out.

Confidence in students without a direct control of the teachers is not a habit in schools. Normally, the students are left alone when the teachers control the work they are doing and afterwards they can evaluate its results. But in mediation evaluation can only be done a posteriori, and in the work that is done, although the general process is known, the particular process of the parties in conflict in each situation is never known by "others". This is why it demands an amount of confidence in all the process.

- The solutions: The agreements that are adequate for the parties are those that they determine. The only limit is that they are not against the human rights or the limits established by the school, if the agreements should affect it. The solutions, the agreements are of the parties. They have nothing to do with what others think or what for others is more convenient or adequate. This situation makes the students, the parties, work on their co-responsibility to achieve what they think is more adequate for both of them. It does not matter that others do not like it, that others do not understand it; what is important is an agreement that is valid for the parties who were in conflict.

- Taking into account this situation and what the change of paradigm implies it is necessary that when the establishment of a Mediation Service begins in the School, we begin from:
 - An information/sensitization of all the members of the School Community.
 - To propose a specific training in School Mediation to:
 - Directing Staff.
 - Teachers.
 - Beneficiary students of the Mediation Service.
 - Parents of the School.
 - Non-teaching staff.

If we want to have a school in which the resource of the Mediation Service not only begins but also becomes operational, and thus is efficient in achieving its goal and is a resource in the prevention and attention of the situations of school violence, expressed through the conflicts between peers or between two different parties, it is necessary to obtain from each of the members of the School Community a series of requisites.

Directing Staff:

- That it understands what mediation is.
- That one of its members participates in the specific training on the content of mediation.
- That it compromises in the projection and implementation of the mediation service in the school facilitating:
 - The flexibility of the students' timetables for carrying out the training and the real mediations.
 - The organisation of timetables so that the sensitisation and information with the students and the teachers of the School can be done.
 - The adequate spaces for the specific performance of the mediators' training and a space for the performance of the mediations.
 - The adequate materials for the Projection of the Mediation Service in the School every time the school year begins.
 - That it has an active presence in the activities that are related to this matter as a representation of the school and that they form part of the school.
 - That it recognises the convenient times for the performance of the task to the person in charge of the co-ordination of this Service (adult Mediation co-ordinator).

Teaching team.

It is fundamental that the Team of teachers who are daily in contact and working with the students know what mediation is, its primary objectives, the techniques it uses, and the procedures for its implementation.

Teachers are continuous references for the students, hence if they cooperate with the learning the students have with respect to mediation with the continuous behaviour or conduct in the classroom, the impact is much stronger. That is, if to work with conflicts one of the important techniques is active listening, the fact that a teacher listens actively to his/her students, in the same way that students learn in the Mediators' training, makes the learning of the students coherent, and furthermore it is globalised. The active reference in the classroom, the teacher, uses techniques that later on form a part of the mediation process. The learning is much quicker.

In any case, the necessary elements required by this group of teachers would be the following:

- That they know the existence of the programme in the School.
- That they are informed and if possible sensitised about the importance of Mediation as an alternative to the resolution of conflicts and hence an alternative to work with school Violence.
- That they understand the importance of the fact that the students are the protagonists of the conflicts that they generate and that they trust in the capacity they have to look for solutions.
- That they understand the importance of giving responsibilities to the students, although this might mean not controlling absolutely all the school with respect to the process of teaching-learning.
- That they understand the meaning of mediation so they can motivate the students in conflict to attend the service and strengthen before the others the role of the mediators in the school.
- That they understand that although in many cases the mediators are not "exemplary students", said mediators are persons who have learned to work with their peers in the matter of solving conflicts and that they are capable of carrying it out.
- That they count on the Mediation Service as a real and operational resource that the School has to give answers to the needs (of resolution of conflicts) that appear in the school.
- That they are flexible regarding the timetables with the students that are being trained in Mediation and are going to be future mediators so that the training group may adjust to an agreed and real timetable.

The Students.

This is the most numerous group of the School.

To work with students from the perspective of mediation implies taking into account many elements, but I will only go over a few of them:

- Students are educated in a social model that is reflected in all the contexts in which they move, hence the School is another one. Generally, according to the students, this social model talks about: “Everyone mind their own business and do not interfere with what others do, most of all if it is not good”. Evidently fights, insults, physical assaults, thefts, etc. are situations that students classify as unpleasant and typical which you are better out of, and if you are in them you must end up winning so as to not appear as a “good-for-nothing or a loser” in the face of the group.

From the perspective of “staying outside of conflicts so that nothing touches you” at first many students see mediation as an “interference” in the other’s conflict. When this is analysed and they see that the mediator is not going to enter any conflict, but instead will only be ready to collaborate in restoring the communication process of the parts in conflict, as long as they voluntarily wish to do so, the students begin to understand the meaning of Mediation.

- Another important element to be taken into account with students is **the responsibility they are given with the management of Mediation**. It is important to explain to them that they are responsible for their conflicts and hence nobody better than they can analyse, work, and reach agreements that benefit both parties.

This characterisation of the student as an adult, regarding the responsibility he/she is given, and the importance that as persons they have in the process, is one of the most important elements in the motivation of students, in the training process they are going through, and in the implementation of the Mediation service in the School.

- To work based on the fact that **the students CAN perform the process by themselves** means approaching the self-concept and self-esteem of the students. We must say that in the schools we have worked with both on sensitisation and on the implementation of the Mediation Service of the School we have found that the Self-esteem and the Self-concept of the students both of primary and secondary schools were very low. For this reason we worked this subject procedurally in the following way:

- When we begin to value them for what each of them is and knows the students begin to contribute to the group.
- When we begin to value them for their differences and the contribution of each one’s style to the training group and we do not tell them that they are good or bad, but on the contrary that what they

say is valid but that we are going to adapt it to the objectives that we have here they begin to collaborate in the process of the group.

- When we begin to listen to them, first the “nonsense they say”, then “what they are feeling”, and later “the proposals they have”, they begin to feel important in the group and they begin to acquire confidence in it to be able to work.
- When we do not use the stereotypes, most of all those that refer to bookworm, irresponsible, break all the rules, being a bad student, being lazy, being a troublemaker, being childish, being irresponsible, being “silly”, etc. and we simply transform the difference into capacity and from there we enhance the resources of the person, said person feels valued and what he/she first does is to stay in the work place.
- When they feel that they form part of something where each of them is important, it is the time to give responsibilities to the group, but trusting that they are capable. And they are capable because they know and because they want to do it.

All the students of the School need to be informed of the presence of the Mediation Service in the school so that they can attend it if they consider it necessary. And in the same way it is necessary that they are sensitised about the importance of this process so that they not only respect the mediators but also they make their job easy, and hence they can work directly on the Prevention of Violence in schools.

The parents of the School.

The collectivity of parents of the school is important and is necessary in the implementation of this project. We remind you that like the teachers, the parents are also educational references of the students, because the students are their sons and daughters. It is important to work with this collectivity from the perspective of the Parents Association of the School as a formalised institution of the School Community and the parents in general as educational references of the students of the school.

Although it is adequate to work with the Parents Association formally, from the institutional role they have, and we do so, we will contribute those elements we think we should work with with this collectivity in general:

- Information and Sensitisation about what mediation is, what it is useful for, and which is the function the School Mediation Service will have in the school itself.
- To make the parents aware of the importance of identifying violent behaviours and defining a guideline of action faced with them.

- That the parents understand the importance of their sons and daughters being capable of learning to solve their own conflicts that they generate themselves or that they feel involved in.
- That the parents facilitate the participation of their sons and daughters in the processes of mediator training or in the processes of mediation themselves.
- That this collectivity knows the techniques to be used in the mediation process so that those who wish, through the training, can learn them and put them into practice in their educational context. In this way the impact of the learning will be greater as not only in the school do we function with a certain method, but also in the family context we act with the same method of resolution of conflicts.
- That the parents who do not participate actively in the training process, but whose sons and daughters do participate, understand and respect the responsibility their sons and daughters acquire and that they can answer the questions, proposals, and attitudes that their sons and daughters make faced with conflicts in the family context, because when one learns, one internalises what one has learned and can use it in the different contexts where one interacts.

The non-teaching staff.

Included in this staff we could name different personalities, but we will refer to two in particular: the porters (Auxiliary Technicians of Control) and the dining-room caretakers and out-of-school monitors.

The porters (Auxiliary Technicians of Control)

The porter has an important task regarding the spacial organisation of the school, as well as of the resources of classrooms, videos, and others that are necessary in the process of information and sensitisation.

It is necessary that the porter is not only informed by the Directing Staff but also informed of the process that is beginning in the School.

- It is important that he/she knows the ways of treating the students, respecting their capacity of responsibility and of confidence in the process they are beginning.
- It is important that he/she knows the coordinators of the Project of implementation of the Mediation Service, as they have to solve many things together: classrooms, material resources, telephone calls, that the cafeteria is left open if we are going to stay for lunch, that they do not close certain doors, that they supply certain keys, etc. because many times the instructions that the Directing Staff give are: be at the disposal of the co-ordinator of the Mediation Project, both of the

coordinating teacher and of the Institution that implements it, in this case AIEEF.

- That he/she knows the objectives of the Mediation Service so that he/she can also inform the students, as the porters are continuous witnesses of conflicts that occur in the corridors, the school playgrounds, even out of the school, and if they have the information they can direct to the Mediation Service.

The dinning-room caretakers and out-of-school monitors.

As we know, these persons work daily with the students of the schools wherever they have these resources. It is extremely important that these persons:

- Are informed and sensitised about the Mediation as an alternative to the resolution of conflicts.
- It would be adequate that they are trained not as mediators but in the use of the mediation techniques, as like the teachers they are adults that work with the students and hence are references in their educational process. For this reason it would be adequate that they use the mediation techniques when conflicts arise or that they could direct to the Mediation Service when the students express a conflict in the spaces where these persons work.

THE IMPLANTATION OF THE MEDIATION OF PEERS RESOURCE IN THE SCHOOL. MEEDUCO PROJECT.

The process we follow to implant the MEEDUCO Project is the following:

1. Stages and moments.

We can divide the Programme in 6 stages, which would include 10 moments.

2. The 6 stages of the MEEDUCO programme

I) Information and sensitization to involve the whole of the educational community so that they face daily and constantly the management of the conflicts that arise or may arise in the school.

II) Analysis of the needs of the school and of the educational community regarding the conflicts that arise and those that can be worked on with mediation.

III) Training of programme coordinators and of the students that are selected to be mediators. This is achieved by

- Developing specific training programmes.
- Role-play exercises of mediation between peers.

- Support materials, written and visual documentation.

IV) Implantation of the Mediation Service in the school, which would comprise three phases:

- Organisation of the Mediation Service
- Actions for the organisation of the Mediation Service
- Opening of the Mediation Service

V) Monitoring.

- Of the needs of the mediators
- Of the starting of the mediations

VI) Evaluation of results of the school mediation Programme.

3. The 10 moments of the MEEDUCO programme.

The development of the project can be done in 10 moments. The process of implantation is the following:

1. Information and sensitization of the Directing Staff of the school and of the teachers that are interested in this subject. The contents are centred in the mediation programme, objectives, participants, importance of the educational process, and budget.

2. Agreement of the starting up of the project.

3. Specific training for the co-ordinator of the Mediation Programme between peers. Depending on the context and the situation of the school, this training can be extended to the team of teachers or to a part of it.

4. Students:

- Information and sensitization.
- Analysis of the school's problems
- Gathering of volunteers for the specific programme of training of peer mediators.

5. Meeting with the participating teachers in the training to establish election criteria of the volunteer candidates in the school for the mediator training course. Identification of the groups of students that are candidates for the mediator training course.

6. Information and sensitization of the parents of the chosen students to accomplish the process of training of peer mediators.

7. Specific training for the selected students to be mediators of the school.

8. Implantation of the mediation service:

8.1 Organisation of the Mediation Service of the School. Meeting between the Co-ordinator of the Mediation Programme (adult) and the Mediators already trained (students) to concrete it.

8.2 Actions for the Organisation of the Mediation Service in the School. Teachers who have received training, Directing Staff, Co-ordinator of the programme, representation of the Mediators, all of them will design how to develop the publicity of the Service counting on the human resources of the school.

8.3 Starting up of the Mediation Service in the school.

9. Monitoring of the co-ordinator of the Programme and the mediators in the mediations that begin to work.

10. Evaluation of the school mediation project in the school. Once developed, the project is evaluated in the school and based on the results the need for new training of other mediators will be valued or the needs that arise will be analysed.