Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională
ISSN: 2066-7329 | e-ISSN: 2067-9270
Covered in: Web of Science (WOS); EBSCO; ERIH+; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Ulrich ProQuest; Cabell, Journalseek; Scipio; Philpapers; SHERPA/RoMEO repositories; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck

2021, Volume 13, Issue 1Sup1, pages: 01-18 | https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/13.1Sup1/382

Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts through Collaboration - an Alternative Way to Facilitate the Social Integration of Students in Primary School

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Abstract: From the first years of school, as teachers, we notice that the students' well-being in class depends not only on the educational progress, the school success or the high scores they get sometimes. We are becoming increasingly aware that a student's motivation to continue to attend school and to participate with high interest is strongly influenced by the interpersonal relationships he or she builds with co-elder colleagues. The harmonization of the interpersonal relationships between students is, perhaps, from the perspective of the child, an undeclared wish. But, from the teachers' perspective, it is a major purpose and a fundamental condition, which should be fulfilled in order to create a safe, supportive and inclusive educational environment. In the present paper we address the issue of including students in the class-groups and highlight the importance of empowering students to solve their own interpersonal conflicts through a collaborative approach. Open dialogue and the construction of win-win solutions are the main components included in such student preparation. We consider that the students, even from primary school cycle, can be taught how to resolve their own interpersonal conflicts in a constructive way, through activities adapted to their age level, to the psychic, emotional, individual and group specificities. The theoretical and practical research we have done during the last three years confirms that the constant management of interpersonal conflicts through collaboration represents an alternative way through which teachers can facilitate the social inclusion of students in the group of co-elders and can ensure a high degree of cohesion of the class-group. The positive effects of resolving interpersonal conflicts through collaboration could be observed and monitored over time also in students with a special social situation. Students belonging to minorities, coming from single-parent families or even from orphanages have registered an increase in the index of sociometric status and a better social inclusion, as a result of participating in the activities of solving interpersonal conflicts through collaboration. Our practical research is still ongoing, but with this paper we bring to the teacher's attention certain directions of action that we have followed and some partial results that we have recorded so far.

Keywords: *Interpersonal conflicts, primary school students, win-win solutions, collaboration, social integration.*

How to cite: Moldovan, D., & Bocoș, M. (2021). Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts through Collaboration - an Alternative Way to Facilitate the Social Integration of Students in Primary School. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala, 13*(1Sup1), 01-18. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/13.1Sup1/382

1. Introduction

Conflicts and various personal, individual or collective experiences arising from them, lived at different degrees of intensity and manifestation, are universal elements, common to human existence in general. At a more particular level of analysis, we refer to the school environment in which students are found in the primary education cycle, more precisely to a dynamic social context, in which it is found that the frequency of interpersonal conflicts between students has an upward trajectory. At the same time, the severity and recurrence of the behaviors adopted by students in situations of conflict with their peers reveal dysfunctions in their approach to such tense social moments. We corroborate valuable ideas from literature, statistical data relevant to the proposed investigation, provided by international studies and organizations, and alternative practical options for conflict management, in order to build an operational framework adapted to primary school students, easy to implement by teachers.

A valuable explanatory basis is provided by the Oxford English Dictionary (2018), which facilitates the understanding of the notion of conflict from several perspectives. On the one hand, conflict is defined as a type of tense and long-lasting interpersonal relationship, materialized by disagreement and/or quarrel: *„a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one."* On the other hand, conflict is explained as an inner state, in which a person is subject to simultaneous and opposite feelings, needs, aspirations: *„a state of mind in which a person experiences a clash of opposing feelings or needs."* Also, based on some explanations offered by Oxford English Dictionaries, there is a direct correspondence between conflict as an intrinsic state of a person and conflict as a form of interpersonal manifestation: *„contradiction between the ideas, interests or feelings of different people, which determines the action."*

Many theorists associate conflict with *„the simultaneous appearance of two or more reciprocal antagonistic impulses or motivations"* (Batubo, 2010). Thus, the conflict is outlined in the context of an intrinsic disorder, with a personal, individual note, which triggers certain reactions, behaviors at the level of each individual. The extent of the conflict depends on the strength of these motivations and impulses, the degree of personal sensitivity to these pressures, the level of self-control and management of the dynamics specific to the emotional side.

The combination of social and psychological perspectives facilitates the creation of a comprehensive image of social conflict, defined and made

explicit by sources in the literature by referring to the concept of socio-cognitive conflict. *The praxeological dictionary of pedagogy, vol. I* (Bocoș et al., 2016) states that, in this form, conflict is *„a source of cognitive and social imbalance"* and constitutes *„a psychosociological mechanism defined by heterogeneity of individuals' responses."* Precisely due to its very dynamic character and its indispensable manifestation of human interactions, socio-cognitive conflict can be treated as a source of personal development and social progress. Confronting personal experiences, initially divergent, through open and constructive dialogue (between two or more parties in dispute), can generate additional knowledge (declarative, procedural, instrumental etc.) both at the individual level and at the level of the group in which the contestants are active.

Conflicts in the school environment can be classified according to numerous criteria. In this paper, we refer to the criteria of the parties involved and focus on interpersonal conflicts between primary school students. Malek (2013) described interpersonal conflict in the document *International Conflict, Conflict Resolution Information Source* as: *„a situation in which one or both people in a relationship have difficulty working or living with each other. This usually occurs due to different or incompatible goals or styles."*, a perspective that shows that such a conflict, triggered between two people, can return regularly during the relationship between them. The category of interpersonal conflicts includes several subcategories of conflicts specific to the school environment, represented by:

- conflicts between superiors and subordinates;
- conflicts among teachers;
- conflicts between teachers and students;
- conflicts among students;
- conflicts between representatives of two or more cultural groups.

Interpersonal conflicts are generally associated with a number of negative personal feelings, such as anger, mistrust, betrayal, or even hatred. The choice of ways of resolving interpersonal conflicts may differ if power is shared equally or unequally between the parties involved. The dynamics of power - the symmetry of power - can vary from case to case, as can the results or consequences of conflict.

Naturally, children in conflict are looking for strategies for resolving their disputes from the earliest years of life, strategies that include physical and verbal tactics, which can be both aggressive and non-aggressive. Non-aggressive physical strategies include taking a toy, a pencil, or entering the

other's playground. Verbal strategies range from simple opposition to complex reasoning and negotiation. If they are unable to use appropriate verbal and emotional modes of expression, students often resort to invasive behavioral manifestations. Thus, they are involved in interpersonal conflicts, seeking to obtain one or more expected results. Among the most common reasons and functions of hostile behavior in conflicts are: gaining acceptance, capturing the attention of colleagues, ensuring access to an activity or a game, the desire for revenge, expressing negative emotions, gaining/demonstrating power or control, the need for protection, the tendency to evade or avoid, gain a material reward, the need for self-regulation or sensory and/or attentional stimulation.

From our perspective, ***conflict resolution*** in school organizations, with emphasis on the social nature of conflicts, can be defined as: *a conscious, controlled, assumed, intentional and strategic approach, whose purpose is to identify alternative ways to resolve a conflict, action followed naturally by the selection, application, reconfiguration and rational regulation of those solutions that support the restoration of a state of equilibrium at the level of relations between disputants, as well as at the individual (intrinsic) level.* Conflict resolution has a curative function on the human being and society in general, providing opportunities to examine alternatives in a situation of disagreement. At the same time, it restores the balance and normality of the relationship between peers. The conflict and the process of resolving it facilitate discussions and involve the parties involved in the conflict, in contexts in which they may choose to make positive alternative decisions, in order to resolve their differences that have caused them conflicting tensions.

It is desirable for the teacher to identify sources of tension, areas of conflict between students and to identify a set of procedures to apply to the group of students to prevent dissent and constructively remedy conflict situations. Teachers should be able to customize a general set of resolution strategies to the specific situation that they observe in class or that students report to them. We studied the connections between causes, strategies and outcomes of conflicts between students. Causes often lead to the identification and application of strategies. Experts also indicate that the settlement strategies adopted by students are related to the results of conflicts between them. Conciliatory behaviors are associated with peaceful outcomes and continuous interaction following the conflict, while maintaining a functional relationship between those who were opponents. Instead, physical domination often leads to the end of interaction between students or to their social exclusion.

In our research we emphasized the formative value of collaboration between students, as a basic strategy in resolving the interpersonal conflicts they experience in the school environment and in facilitating their social inclusion in the class groups. Collaboration is preferable when one's goal is to learn, to pursue the fusion of different points of view, to seek consensus and to combine opposing views. The cooperative style is based on creativity and focuses on solutions that contribute both to solving problems and to balancing the relationships between the people involved. Given that intragroup attitudes are significantly based on cooperation, this style is one with high potential in creating and maintaining group cohesion (collaborative management style).

Following the theoretical studies and practical research, we highlight the fact that teaching students to collaborate in the process of resolving their interpersonal conflicts also contributes to ensuring a greater degree of social inclusion in the school environment. Basically, we propose to teachers an alternative option through which they can help students rejected by the group or those treated with indifference to better integrate in the school community. Specifically, we consider it beneficial to approach the strategy based on ***collaboration*** by using ***the technique of mediation*** or co-mediation of conflicts, because this creates constructive contexts of communication and interrelationships for students. The advantages of conflict mediation lie precisely in its purposes, facilitating the definition of the problem, the development of options and the adoption of solutions accepted by all parties involved. Through the mediation process, the interests of the opponents are identified and an efficient communication between them is promoted. Mediation gives the students in dispute the space and time they need to be listened to extensively, patiently, and then they are directed to negotiation with increased efficiency, with lasting positive effects. Such an approach also helps students with a low degree of social inclusion to participate in constructive dialogues with their peers and strengthens interpersonal relationships, because, in this way, they end up collaborating with their peers in generating solutions to conflicts in which they find themselves. Their views are taken into consideration, they are supported to express their wishes and they actively participate in the establishment of agreements that benefit everyone. At the same time, the other students in the class get to know them better and accept most of the colleagues they rejected in the past. Students who collaborate in critical and tense conflict situations become closer to each other, are more empathetic, more tolerant and experience more intense feelings of belonging to the group.

2. Research Questions/Aims of the Research

The general purpose of our research was to conduct a complex investigation into the phenomenon of conflict in schools, as well as to test the effectiveness of an experimental program to mediate conflicts between students, based on collaborative strategies, customized for primary school students, a context that facilitates better social inclusion of young school children.

From a praxiological point of view, we set ourselves the following ***objectives***:

- $O_{.1.}$ Design, elaboration, implementation and testing of the efficiency of an experimental program for mediating conflicts between students, customized for primary school students;
- $O_{.2.}$ Evaluate the degree of social inclusion of students in class groups, in various stages of the experimental intervention, by measuring their sociometric status and preferential status indices.

In accordance with the pedagogical research undertaken, the investigative approaches and the experimental intervention were guided by certain ***research questions*** related to the issues under study:

- Is it possible to increase the level of socio-centrality of students as a result of their participation in a program for resolving interpersonal conflicts through collaboration?
- Can the development of a conflict mediation program between students, based on collaboration strategies, positively influence their social inclusion in class groups?

The investigative and experimental intervention actions aimed at verifying at the students' level the following ***hypothesis*** of the research:

The implementation of an interpersonal conflict mediation program, based on collaboration strategies, at the level of primary school students will facilitate their better social inclusion in the class groups to which they belong.

At a practical level, we intervened through the independent variable:

I.V.: Implementation of an interpersonal conflict mediation program, based on collaboration strategies, at the level of primary school students.

We measured the values recorded by the following dependent variable:

D.V. - the degree of social inclusion of students.

In order to accurately measure and interpret the results of the experimental research, we considered the possible influences manifested by certain external variables:

E.V.$_1$.: participation of some students in individual psychological counseling sessions;

E.V.$_2$.: the number of students in each class;

E.V.$_3$.: physical/mental illnesses of some students.

At the same time, we monitored and analyzed the differences generated by the moderator variable:

M.V.: chronological age of students.

3. Research Methods

In the process of establishing the groups of subjects, we resorted to the application of two practical sampling models agreed in the pedagogical research:

a) *Quantitative sizing of the* groups *of participants;*
b) *Qualitative sizing of the* groups *of participants.*

The quantitative dimensioning of the experimental group of students was operated so that the formed experience groups, where the independent variable I.V. is introduced, are representative for the general school community from which they were extracted. The determination of the volume of this group of participants was influenced both by variables related to the research methodology and by variables corresponding to the organizational specific. The experimental group of students was selected from the total existing school population at the level of primary education, in the National College „George Barițiu", Cluj-Napoca. Thus, from the community consisting of 224 students, who study at primary education level in the educational institution mentioned above, 127 students (56.69%) were selected to participate in our experimental research.

The qualitative sizing of the experimental group of participants was made according to the general characteristics of the school population and the sampling procedure that was applied. The implementation of the program at the primary cycle requires the selection of experimental classes in which students have a chronological age between a minimum of 8 years and a maximum of 11 years because the type of activities requires functions and tools of thinking specific to the stage of concrete operations. The age criterion played a major role in the sampling process, given that only after the age of 7 the students transit from preoperative to concrete-operational thinking, a thinking that is more flexible, limited to the real experiences they live and which allows them to generate inferences based on the analysis of things in a particular context. For conducting the experimental research, we used class groups, a common procedure in the practice of pedagogical

research, which allows the researcher to maintain a total of 127 students, in our case, organized in experience groups with regular composition, which are active in the natural context of organization of mass education (by classes) and which are considered pre-existing groups of research. We opted for this sampling method, because we aimed to ensure the representativeness of the experimental groups of participants and to create the possibility to generalize certain conclusions of the research.

The selected ***research methods*** and the specific ***tools*** on which their application was based were adapted, customized and combined so as to act convergently, to facilitate a unitary approach for the researcher, to allow the collection of relevant data from different classes of students and respond the needs of investigation, understanding, analysis and improvement of the studied educational and social phenomenon.

Table 1

Synthetic presentation of the research methods and tools used to verify the dependent variable of the research

Dependent variable	Research methods	Research tools
The degree of social inclusion of students	The psycho-pedagogical experiment	Research project
	Sociometric methods	Sociometric tests
	Methods of measurement, synthesis, organization, presentation and mathematical-statistical processing and interpretation of research data	IBM SPSS® Statistics 26.0 Sociometric matrices Sociometric status indices Preferential status indices Statistical groups: synthetic tables Statistical graphs: structure diagrams (areolar), comparison diagrams, graphical modeling

(Source: Authors own contribution)

The design of the present research provides a staging of the experimental approach in accordance with the methodology of research in education sciences. A first essential stage of the experimental research was represented by the ***pre-experimental stage***. The conduct of the experimental intervention was naturally and necessarily preceded by a stage of diagnosis, a time interval when the research team investigated certain

dimensions of the educational reality and diagnosed the problem under investigation. Then, our actions were subordinated to a pre-testing stage in the 2018-2019 school year, when sociometric tests were administered to students in primary grades and their degree of social inclusion was evaluated.

The sociometric test used for primary school students is an original product, being designed by the researcher, in accordance with official stipulations for the development of sociometric tests. The structure of the test includes two items that require respondent students to express choices and rejections in relation to other members of the class group to which they belong. The formulation of the tasks is adapted and customized for the level of understanding of the young school age students and respects the norms of pedagogical deontology. The sociometric test is completed independently and individually by each student included in the study, under the guidance of the researcher. The structure of the tool is simple and intuitive: the first item asks students to write the names of their classmates (1-3 students) with whom they prefer to play or work in a team and the second item asks them to write the names of their classmates (1-3 students) with whom they do not like to have such activities. The expression of preferences and rejections by students were recorded in sociometric matrices and allowed us to investigate the internal dynamics of classes from the perspective of social inclusion, calculating the values of sociometric status indices and preferential status indices. The sociometric method was applied, with the related tool, because it facilitates the study of interpersonal relationships at the level of class groups, from the perspective of social/intragroup acceptance and inclusion. Our conclusions and generalizations, formulated based on the data recorded at the level of these participants, have a high degree of veracity because all classes of students involved in the study are well-known by the researcher and this is a recommendation of specialists (Bocoș, 2007) that we respect.

Following this stage, the ***experimental stage*** took place, included in the research calendar for the 2019-2020 school year and intended to test the impact of the experimental program, at the level of students in selected primary classes. Both teachers and students were trained in the procedure for implementing the conflict resolution program. The development of specific activities/mediation sessions for interpersonal conflicts between students was flexible, their periodicity/frequency being influenced by the daily, real and particular needs of each class of students.

Schrumpf et al. (1991) proposed six essential steps in carrying out the specific mediation activity, which we present below in an adapted form, applied with the students from the experimental primary classes:

Step 1: Open the mediation session

The mediator introduces himself, receives the conflicting parties, who also present themselves, and reserves the time necessary for the introduction. At this stage, the purpose of mediation, its role, as well as the consequences in case of non-resolution of the conflict are explained. The main rules presented at the moment are:

- uninterrupted dialogue;
- communication without insults, nicknames or physical contact;
- declaring the truth;
- expressing the agreement for solving the disputed problem.

Step 2: Obtain information

Each party involved in the conflict is given the opportunity to comment on the experienced events, without interrupting the presentation. After the first participant has spoken, the mediator summarizes the information and asks the other party to present his version of the facts, also without interruption. The mediator summarizes, once again, the information shared by the conflicting parties. Each of the actors in the conflict has the opportunity to bring additional information in the presentation of the case, which is again summarized by the mediator, until the parties involved have fully understood their conflict.

Step 3: Focus on common interests

This step is essential because it helps students in conflict to identify common interests or points of view and to look at the problem they face from different perspectives. Once they have established a common ground, the parties to the conflict have the ability to formulate a common goal, which will gradually guide them in creating a solution to their problem.

Step 4: Generating options – Brainstorming

The mediator asks the parties to think creatively about ideas that could resolve their dispute. As ideas are generated, various solutions are proposed. The options can also be created by combining several suggestions made by the parties. In brainstorming, each student will follow the rules: be creative, do not judge the other's ideas and think of as many (realistic) alternatives as possible.

Step 5: Evaluate the options and choose a solution

Conflicting actors (students) will be asked to review the list of options, to evaluate each one and agree on a solution that is suitable for all those involved in the conflict. We recommend that, at the age of early schooling, the chosen solution should be: specific (clear), observable/

measurable, achievable for the parties involved, relevant to the issue in conflict and possibly limited in time (if necessary).

Step 6: Write the contract

The mediator prepares a written contract, which underlines/highlights the agreement. This agreement is written using only the words of the parties involved and includes only the solution agreed upon by the mediated students. All participants sign the contract and each receives a copy of it. Before leaving the mediation session, all those involved shake hands and the mediator thanks the parties for their participation.

The mediator can be the teacher or a student-mediator chosen by classmates. If co-mediation is desired, then two students-mediators are chosen, who work in pairs, like a single mediator. All actions required by such a mediation program are subordinated to ethical principles and the *win-win* vision, respecting a specific process: formulating the problem between students in conflict, identifying all students directly or indirectly involved in this situation, knowing their real needs, the search for common interests that meet these needs, the creation of alternative solutions and the selection of one that fully satisfies all the conflicting parties.

The experimental research was completed with the ***post-experimental stage*** and the administration of the posttest. We reapplied to the students included in the class groups, who participated in the conflict resolution program through collaboration and mediation, the research tools used in the pre-experimental, pre-testing stage. Thus, the values of the dependent variable followed in the research were verified and conclusions were formulated in connection with the research hypothesis.

4. Results

The results registered for each class of students involved were condensed into sociometric matrices and were used, both in the pretest and in the posttest, to determine the sociometric status indices $I_{SS} = \frac{n}{N-1}$, by reference to the psychological factor of attractions (appreciations expressed by students) and to the standard value I = 1, as well as to the calculation of preferential status indices $I_{SP} = \frac{Na-Nr}{N-1}$. The analysis and stratification of the experimental group of students according to I_{SP} values, by reference to the categories of preferential power in which they integrate, allowed us to discover particularities of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and intragroup structure for the school community we studied. Therefore, we investigated the extent to which the independent variable I.V. influenced the

values of the dependent variable D.V. until the end of the intervention, analyzing the degrees of social inclusion registered by students. For this component of our research hypothesis, we had formulated two statistical hypotheses, additional, which we followed during the experimental approach and which were verified at the end of the sociometric analysis in the posttest:

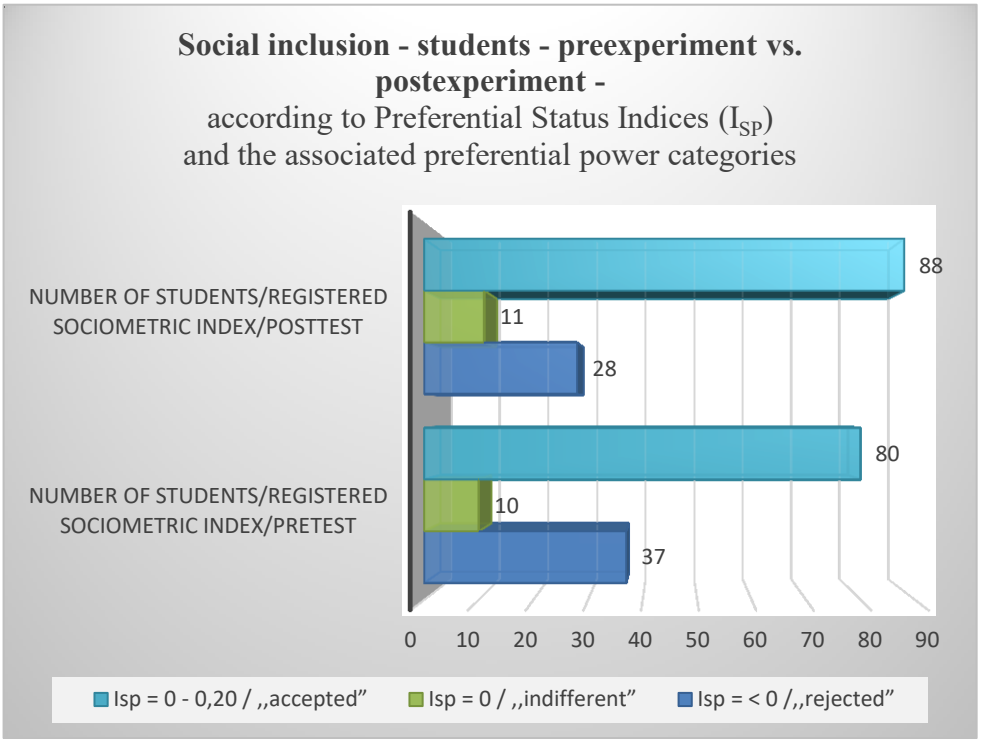
H_0: The degree of social inclusion of students participating in the experimental conflict mediation program is not higher in the posttest than in the pretest.

H_1: The degree of social inclusion of students participating in the experimental conflict mediation program is higher in the posttest than in the pretest.

We operated comparative analyzes, studying the changes produced from the moment of the pretest to the posttest, in terms of the degree of social inclusion of students. Through the comparison diagram from Figure 1 we highlight the general situations existing in the two test moments, prior to the researcher's intervention and following the psycho-pedagogical experiment. The number of cases of students accepted ($I_{SP} = 0 \rightarrow 0.20$) in the group increased from 80 to 89, respectively from the frequency of 63% (pretest) to that of 69.3% (posttest). The cases of rejected students ($I_{SP} < 0$) decreased from 37 to 28, the extension of this category of preferential power being reduced from 29% (pretest) to 22% (posttest). From a numerical point of view, in the category of students considered indifferent ($I_{SP} = 0$) there were no major changes, with 11 cases in the posttest, instead of 10, so a slightly high frequency, from 8% (pretest) to 8.7% (posttest). However, we found a special dynamic within the previously mentioned category, created by the migration of certain cases of students from the category of rejected subjects to that of indifferent ones or from that of indifferent subjects to that of subjects accepted by the group. Therefore, the introduction of the experimental factor represented by the conflict resolution program, based on collaboration strategies, has produced changes in the sense of improving the social inclusion of students, which is reflected not only in the overall picture of the group, but also within the preferential power categories.

Figure 1

Comparability of students in relation to their degree of social inclusion in the class group - numerical expression of existing cases in the pretest and posttest



(Source: Authors own contribution)

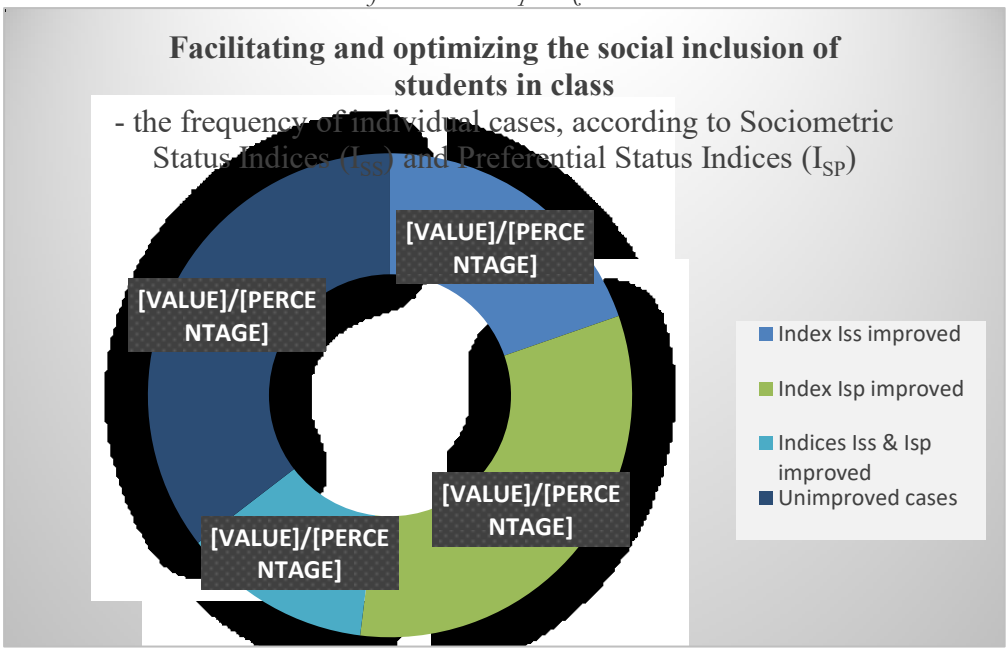
The active involvement of primary school students in the interpersonal conflict resolution program led to the facilitation of inclusion and social acceptance for 64.56% (82 subjects) of them.

We evaluated the changes that occur individually, from the perspective of social inclusion and sociocentrality of students and found that, of the total participants, 19.68% (25 subjects) have sociometric status indices (I_{SS}) with higher values and an improved degree of sociocentrality compared to the moment of the pretest. At 32.28% (41 subjects) the values of the preferential status indices (I_{SP}) increased and at 12.59% (16 subjects) we found the increase of the values for both types of calculated sociometric indices. In all these cases the degree of social inclusion of students in the class group to which they belong is higher in the posttest than in the pretest. We graphically illustrate the distribution of student cases for which the degree of social inclusion was optimized (the change is quantifiable), using the structure diagram in Figure 2, which provides an overview of the entire

experimental group of students, from the perspective of data recorded for the dependent variable D.V.

Figure 2

Structure diagram: Overview of the frequency of cases in which the social inclusion of students was facilitated and optimized



(Source: Authors own contribution)

5. Discussions

These improved results are supported by the values of statistical indices calculated before and after the psycho-pedagogical experiment, both to evaluate the central tendency of the experimental group of students, in pretest and posttest, and to investigate the standard deviation from the central tendency.

Regarding the degree of sociocentrality of students, we obtained in pretest the arithmetic mean m = 0.0990 for the sociometric status index (I_{SS}) which then characterized the entire investigated group. Having an asymmetric statistical distribution of the individual data measured at the level of the students, we also determined the value of the median for the I_{SS}, obtaining the value m_d = 0.08. The mean of students for I_{SS} is influenced by extreme cases and does not change significantly until the posttest, which is

why we focus on the value of the median, which increases to $m_d = 0.10$. An additional change, in the amelioration sense, is indicated by the value of the mode, which increases from $m_0 = 0$ (for I_{SS} pretest) to $m_0 = 0.3$ (for I_{SS} posttest), thus showing that $I_{SS} = 0.3$ has the highest frequency, exceeding the point of zero value, which predominated prior to the researcher's intervention.

The evaluation from the pretest of the degree of social inclusion (I_{SP}) of the students, in general, led to a mean value of $m = 0.0027$, which increases until the moment of the posttest, reaching the value of $m = 0.0209$. An obvious upward trajectory is demonstrated by the median, a statistical index that accurately reflects the central tendency of the experimental group of students; its value increases from $m_d = 0.05$ (for pretest I_{SP}) to $m_d = 0.07$ (for posttest I_{SP}). At the same time, the increase of the degree of social inclusion, in general, is also highlighted by the total score, registered based on the individual values of the I_{SP}, which changes significantly, from 0.34 (pretest) to 2.65 (posttest).

Complementary to these inferences, we study the correlation between the results registered in the pretest and in the posttest, under the influence of the introduced independent variable I.V. We calculate the simple correlation coefficient (Pearson correlation) for the data related to the students' degrees of social inclusion (I_{SP}), from the two main test moments, and we obtain $r = 0.184$, at $p = 0.038$. We thus discover the presence of a positive correlation, statistically significant at the $P < 0.05$ level. The generated value of the simple correlation coefficient is higher than the value corresponding to the critical correlation coefficient, at the $P = 0.05$ level ($|r| \approx 0.17$, $df > 120$).

A relevant observation, worthy of consideration in future studies and training interventions, refers to the degree of receptivity of students to the program for resolving interpersonal conflicts, depending on the chronological age. From the beginning of the psycho-pedagogical experiment we monitored the influence of this moderator variable (M.V.) and we found that younger students are more open to resolutive approaches promoted through collaborative activities. The earlier it is implemented, in the first years of schooling, the more likely the formative effects of this program are to be reflected in ensuring a higher degree of social inclusion of students in school and having a balanced socio-affective and interpersonal climate.

We find an improvement in the degree of social inclusion of students, a fact highlighted by the increased values associated with the

characteristic previously investigated and analyzed. The ascending path of these values is facilitated by the implementation of the experimental program. The values of sociometric indices increased as students became involved in the activities proposed by this formative intervention. At the level of the entire experimental group of students there are increases in the degree of social inclusion, generated by the experimental intervention, which leads to the acceptance of the specific hypothesis (H_1) and the validation of the positive impact of the conflict resolution program, based on collaboration strategies (I.V.), a program that can facilitate and optimize students' social inclusion even in conflict situations.

The mediation programme set up and implemented by the researcher confirmed the practical value and represents an element of novelty and of originality, suggesting an alternative, structured, achievable approach of the activities of efficiently managing the conflicts in which are engaged in the students from the primary school.

Through our research and the associated results we emphasize the efficiency of the proposed practical approaches, but also the necessity for a legislative framework that allow developing the programme of mediation the conflicts, at a large scale, as well as creating some instruments and curriculum support inspired by the programme *Peer Mediation*, to be adopted in the Romanian schools, in a coherent, comprehensive and systematic manner. In Romania there is a deficiency in terms of programs for mediation of peer conflicts and social inclusion of students in primary schools. Practitioners often develop and apply, intuitively, strategies in this regard to help their students better adapt to the school environment.

We state that this paper can be a useful model for teachers in Romania and other European countries who aim to innovate ways to support the students' social inclusion. The implementation directions that we have tasted and we promote through this research are in consonance with the *Agenda 2030* drafted by UNESCO (2011) and respond to real and current needs identified on a large scale in the school environment. Applied consistently, such programs, like the one we proposed, contribute over time not only to a better social inclusion of students, but also to the development of autonomous personalities and future responsible citizens, able to collaboratively manage interpersonal conflicts and support others in their efforts to integrate in the community.

6. Conclusions

The independent variable I.V. influenced the values of the dependent variable D.V., between them being a positive correlation. Changes in improving students' social inclusion were highlighted both in general, by increasing the number of cases of students included in the category of preferential power of subjects accepted by the group, and in particular, by increasing the values of sociometric status indices (I_{SS}) and/or those of preferential status (I_{SP}) registered by students. The approaches proposed by our research are applicable at the level of primary education classes, have an instructional design adapted to the specificity of this age level and can be adopted by any teacher who aims to develop collaborative relationships between students even in conflict situations, as an alternative way to ensuring their social inclusion.

Our research contributes to the creation of a coherent theoretical explanatory, informative and coherently formative pattern, addressed to the teachers, as educational factors, who can manage the conflicts among students optimally, supporting them, likewise the schoolchildren to develop the skills of solving autonomously and constructively of their own interpersonal conflicts, as well as to better integrate them into class groups.

In the light of the results obtained and analyzed in our study, we identify conclusive answers to all the research questions that have been formulated. The statistical analysis and interpretation of the data attest to the fact that the degree of social inclusion of students can be optimized if the resolution of their interpersonal conflicts is based on collaboration strategies and mediation techniques. As such, according to the effects obtained after the introduction of the experimental factor, we can state that the hypothesis of our research is validated.

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