TEACHER ACTIVITIES AGAINST VICTIMIZATION IN SCHOOL

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Abstract

Conflicts are encountered on a daily basis and are a common, inevitable part of life and part of human nature. Conflicts occur between people of all ages, i.e., between adults, between adults and children, and between children. The very realization of their existence, and the fact that we are thinking and talking about conflicts is an important way of providing strategies to resolve them. There are many ways to resolve conflicts; some prove to be successful, and others not; however, there is no single, correct or universal recipe for conflict resolution. There are just different paths, which we keep rediscovering over and over again. The same goes for resolving conflicts in school, which is why it is very important that an appropriate climate is created in the school, which promotes positive values. At the same time, it is important that both teachers and students are trained in (potential) conflict resolution. This research focuses mainly on the perception of real and potential conflicts and indicates possible solutions, which were created as part of the international Erasmus + project Mediators and Peacemakers Against Peer Victimization – MEPEV[1].
Keywords: *conflict resolution, conflict situations, mediation and peacemaking, mediation in school*

Introduction

Because conflicts are a constant problem in our lives, it is important that we learn at an early age to resolve them peacefully and deal with the problems we encounter. Since conflicts are inevitable, even necessary for human development and progress, it makes no sense to think about how to create a conflict-free world. Instead, we need to consider how to teach children to cope with various problems at a very early stage in their life. One of the ways to resolve conflicts that arise in the school environment peacefully is peer mediation, which is discussed in more detail later on (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Bandura, 1977; EURIDICE, 2011).

Although conflicts, which are, as emphasized above, an integral and inevitable part of our lives, most often cause negative feelings in the people involved, they are much needed for human development. Through conflicts, people learn about different views of the world

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1   http://mepev.org/index.php?lang=eng

and how to cooperate (i.e., work together). Responses to a conflict situation can be divided into functional and non-functional, depending on whether they are focused on mutual conflict resolution and interpersonal cooperation or whether it is simply a quarrel aimed not at resolving but at showing anger. There is a widespread view that conflicts are to blame for disagreements, quarrels, divorces, social unrest, and violence. In reality, the reason for this is the inability to resolve conflicts in a constructive way, pointing out that a certain amount of frustration is required between a child and an educator for the sake of the child's normal development. At the same time, the child is dealing with an opposition – a conflict between two needs, the need for security and the need for freedom. Through this kind of conflict, the child progresses to a higher level of moral development. This is considered an ideal educational situation in which children can learn a lot because emotions are involved. What matters, then, is how one deals with the conflict and not the outcome of the conflict situation. Every conflict can contribute to our personal and social growth if we know how to resolve it constructively (Johnson & Johnson, 1991, Cremin, 2007).

Each conflict is, at the same time, different and similar. They are different because no conflicts are identical, and similar because there are common and recognizable patterns in all conflicts. These patterns can be described in different ways. A popular way of doing this is by means of the so-called "conflict staircase" model. This model outlines the basic and typical course of a conflict: what happens between people when a conflict runs off track. The model is commonly used in literature on conflict resolution. It consists of seven steps:

- *disagreement* (there is a disagreement about something which leads to discomfort);
- *personalizing the problem* (it is the other's fault; the other is stupid, and the other is the problem);
- *escalation* (more problems occur, and old issues are brought into the conflict; at this level conflict is a reality);
- *forming alliances* (each part of the conflict gathers around and seeks alliances among friends. Each part talks about rather than with the other. At this level dialogue is usually abandoned, there is no communication between the conflicting parts, instead, there may be taken actions);
- *enemy imaging* (the counterpart is described in negative ways (often as a non-human being: an animal or a monster); at this stage, the parts often focus on how they have been and feel offended);
- *open hostility* (now there is one aim which is to hurt the counterpart. If anybody tries to use diplomacy or tone down the conflict, he/she will be looked upon as a traitor);
- *separation or fight* (the viewpoint at this stage is that there is not enough space for both of us in the same territory. A physical separation, maybe even by violent means such as war, is necessary (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Cremin, 2007; Milivojevič, 2011).

Conflict Resolution Processes

When talking about conflict resolution, we have to take into account that each person tends to respond to conflict with a particular style that is more or less predominant; each style shows different behaviours. In order to describe the styles, we should take into account

two main aspects: the goal each party has and the relationship between parties. Depending on what is more important for the person, either the goal or the relationship, both or none, he will show one of these most common styles (Scott, 2005):

- *Avoidance*: it is the non-negotiation of one's position. This strategy implies that the worry about the relationship and the goals is low, so the person avoids conflict, which means he denies that conflict exists. This position could be characterized by "I lose – You lose".
- *Accommodation*: Here, the relationship is very important, and the worry about the goal is low. The person does not want to spoil the relationship and prefers to compromise. It is another way of avoiding conflict. This is the position "I lose – You win".
- *Competition*: The result is the most important aspect. A person that follows this strategy sees conflict as "one is wrong and the other one is right". It is the typical "I win – You lose".
- *Solution*: With this strategy both aspects are important: keeping the relationship and reaching goals for both parties. They both try to reach the best result as possible for all. They are not focused on who is right/wrong but on trying to find a satisfactory solution for both parties. It is the position "I win – You win".

The most common conflict resolution intervention processes at schools are peer tutoring, mediation, and negotiation. All three are described briefly below (Noaks, & Noaks, 2009, Schrumpf, Crawford & Bodine, 1997).

Peer tutoring has its origin in the United Kingdom schools. It is based on the creation of a corpus within the school where communication and negotiation of conflicts are promoted. The main aspect is the creation and training of a group of students/pupils that are able to listen and accompany those peers who have a conflict to solve.

Mediation is a voluntary process, and it is necessary when the parties involved in the conflict are not able to solve it alone. The third party is an impartial expert and tries to help the parties to find the best solution as possible. The impartial party doesn't give a solution; it only tries to make the parties find it themselves.

Negotiation is a process that allows parties to solve a conflict from a win-win perspective. The difference in comparison to mediation is that here there is no third party. Both parties involved in the conflict collaborate in the process following different guidelines: identification of needs and interests, keeping respectful communication, looking for many possible solutions, choosing the best solution for both, and making a plan of action to decide who does what and when.

It is important to note that there are some conflicts that cannot have an immediate solution, or maybe they will never disappear, so we should try to learn how to live with conflicts. But there are many others, fortunately, that we think can be solved. Conflict can be considered as an unavoidable aspect of social relationships, and it is not negative itself. The difficulty is that any conflict can adopt a constructive or a destructive way. The point, therefore, is not to eliminate or prevent conflict but to confront conflict in a positive way. The idea should be not to look for winners or losers but to build a culture based on collaboration and agreement (MEPEV, 2020; Cremin, 2007; Evertson & Weinstein, 2013).

Dealing with the Emotional Aspects of Conflict

It is necessary to evoke positive emotions to resolve conflicts and improve relationships. When it comes to coping with conflicts, most people ignore or suppress most of the emotions. However, no matter how much people try to stay insensitive, their hearts tend to beat faster during a conflict, their palms sweat, and their breathing quickens. All these physical signs indicate underlying emotions that can complicate the discussion (IREX; 2013).

Conflicts can be resolved more successfully when mind and emotion are taken into account. The challenge is to learn how to effectively cope with a lot of positive and negative emotions (excitement, fear, pride, shame, hope, despair, joy, disappointment) without being overwhelmed.

• *Focus on basic concerns.*

Focus on basic concerns rather than feelings. These concerns represent basic human desires that underlie both negative and positive emotions in any conflict.

• *Appreciation*

It is the most important basic aspect to keep in mind in case of any conflict. It includes the desire to be appreciated, understood, and valued. Expressing appreciation involves finding value in another person's perspective.

• *Correlating*

The hostile "me against you" tendency in a conflict can be balanced by forming an emotional bond so that enemies become allies. They cooperate to solve a problem. Building commitment requires approaching significant differences as shared problems to be resolved together. Even if the issues that divide people are controversial and heated, collaborative problem solving can be helpful. Simple techniques can also help to build commitment. Examples include having small conversations about common interests such as sports, music, and careers, using the pronouns "we" and "we" to convey a sense of common purpose, and sitting side by side, not opposite a table. These strategies encourage collaboration.

• *Autonomy*

Conflicts often arise when people feel that they are not sufficiently involved in a decision that directly affects them. Always consult before deciding, so that people are actively involved in the decision-making process when the outcome affects them in any way.

• *Status*

In a conflict, opposing parts can compete for position or expertise. One might say, "I have more experience in this area", or use body language, which denotes a superior status. Not surprisingly, this can make the other person feel small or angry. However, status can also be used positively. One person can start a discussion by asking the other for advice. This does not reduce the status of the first person but allows the other person to express a point of view and share his/her expertise.

• *Role*

People play many roles in their life. A person can be a student, a son, or a brother. But when it comes to resolving a conflict, the roles people play tend to be temporary. They act as listeners, mediators, or defenders in a variety of ways. The challenge

is to determine which role is most suitable in specific cases. In some cases, one party may need to adjust roles to resolve a conflict. For example, a friend wants to discuss a frustrating situation when he comes to school. Someone intervenes (as a friend) and provides advice on how to solve the problem. The advice may be good, but the friend gets angry and scolds him for interrupting. He wanted the other person to listen to him because he could not speak freely outside. So, the friend's most productive role is not as a defender, but as a listener. Other times, both parties may take on different temporary roles or even take the same role more than once to solve a problem. Examples of such helpful temporary roles include the common problem solver, brainstorm, devil's advocate, or mediator Cremin, 2007; Evertson & Weinstein, 2013).

What is Mediation?

Mediation is a form of conflict resolution and is as old as humankind, with roots in many cultures and world religions. Today, it is practised widely across the world as a traditional non-confrontational method of conflict resolution. Its current popularity began in the 1970s in the USA, from where it has extended into other parts of the world, including Europe. Mediation is used extensively within the legal profession, as well as in a range of other areas, including community mediation, environmental mediation, peer mediation in schools, family mediation, workplace mediation and intergroup conflict mediation. The neutral, facilitative, informal, and voluntary nature of mediation is what sets it apart as a specific process of dispute resolution. These are also the elements that give it the power to transform conflict and human relationships (Cremin, 2007). The four fundamental principles of mediation are:

1. *Voluntary participation*
This means that either party can choose to stop mediation at any time, and both parties must be willing and open to mediate. It offers control over the situation, safe in the knowledge that mediation can be stopped or paused at any time.

2. *Impartiality*
The mediator is there for both parties and is not there to take sides or give advice. The mediator is a neutral third party who is specially trained in facilitating and encouraging discussions between parties to assist in reaching an agreement outside of the Court.

3. *Confidentiality*
The information you share with the mediator and discussions you have during mediation are kept private. If parties try to reach an agreement during mediation, but it does not work, the Court will not be informed of any former proposals discussed during mediation (with some limited exemptions, for example, on considering costs, by agreement and children issues).

4. *Involved parties control the outcome*
Any agreement or decision reached is done so within the parties' own terms. Mediators do not make any decisions. Any decision reached is not legally enforceable unless you instruct lawyers to make your agreement legally binding.

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Peer Mediation

In peer mediation, a trained youth acts as a neutral mediator helping parties in conflict to understand the root causes of their dispute and to ultimately agree on a plan for resolving the
conflict (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). The greatest advantage of peer mediation training is the ability of trained youth to transfer mediation skills to a variety of settings, including family and neighbourhood conflicts, helping youth to become better problem-solvers and more responsible citizens. Research supports the finding that a sense of belonging is a very important factor in preventing violence in schools. Suspension or expulsion can push students further away from their learning communities whereas a school peer mediation program promotes critical thinking and builds decision-making skills, develops healthy standards of relationship within the school community and supports student self-determination. The role of the mediator in the mediation can be described as follows: the mediator does not rule who is right and who is wrong and does not make a binding decision. A mediator is not a judge but is a trusted, neutral professional. With special mediation techniques, he or she helps establish effective communication to better illuminate the background of the dispute, takes the interests of all clients into consideration, and helps find a fair, mutually acceptable resolution to the problem (Cremin, 2007; Evertson, & Weinstein, 2013).

Research Focus

This research focused on how teachers react to conflict situations between children in the classroom, who they involve in conflict resolution, and what procedures they use to resolve the conflict. It also examined the extent to which teachers are willing to deal with conflict on their own, and what teachers do to reduce the number of conflicts in the classroom (how important are positive attitudes in conflict resolution, and how much the group (class, department) invests in developing positive values in the students). Based on this, two research questions were formed:

1. What do teachers do in order to minimise the number of conflicts in the classroom?
2. What are the teachers' suggestions for a more effective process of conflict resolution?

Research Methodology

General Background

An e-survey on ways of resolving conflicts was sent to two institutions: the Muta Primary School and the Slovenj Gradec Primary School. The objective was to find out how teachers react to conflict situations between children, who they involve in conflict resolution, and what procedures they use to resolve conflict. In addition, the objective was to determine the extent to which they are willing to deal with conflict on their own, and what they are doing to reduce the number of conflicts in the classrooms.

Research Sample

The study included 53 Slovenian teachers from the Carinthia region ($N = 53$) aged 30 to 51 or more. Three teachers were under 30 years old, 10 teachers were 31 to 40 years old, 19 teachers were 41 to 50 years old, and 21 teachers were 51 and older. According to the triad, however, there were 20 teachers teaching in the I. triad and 8 teachers teaching in the II. triad (primary level), and 25 teachers teaching in III. triads (secondary level). We selected the teachers at random and sent them an electronic questionnaire, which they solved.

Research Results

Teachers were asked where they believe children get their first experience in conflict resolution. According to the teachers' opinion, children gain conflict resolution experience in the family (at home), while playing with their peers, and in kindergartens. Children gain the least experience in conflict resolution in schools, according to the teachers (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Teachers' Opinions on Where Children Gain their First Experience in Conflict Resolution
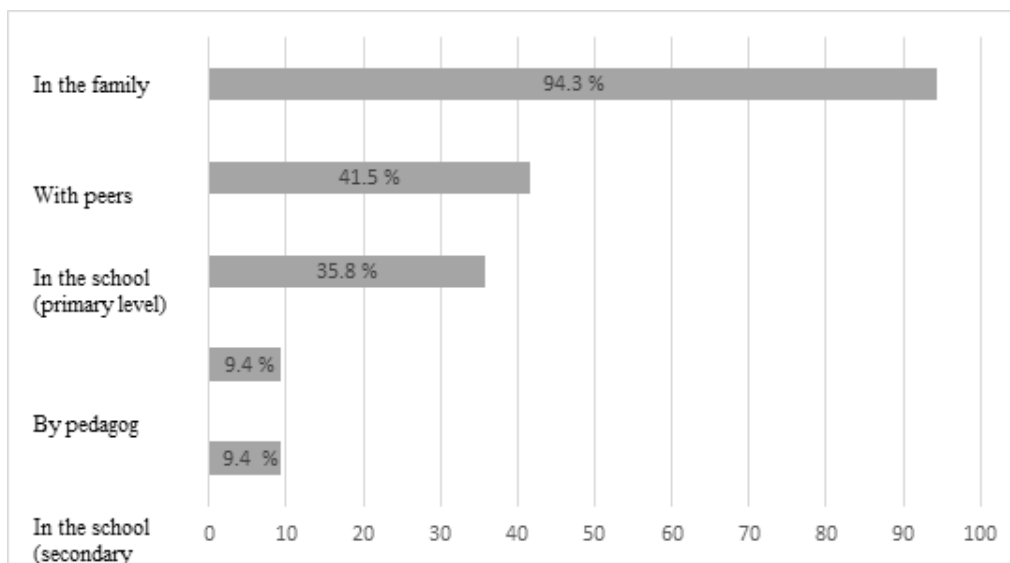
Teachers were then asked about the kind of situations in which children most often enter conflict. It was established that children most often enter conflicts on account of someone taking the other's belongings, because of inappropriate, offensive or disrespectful communication, and because of physical violence and teasing (Figure 2).
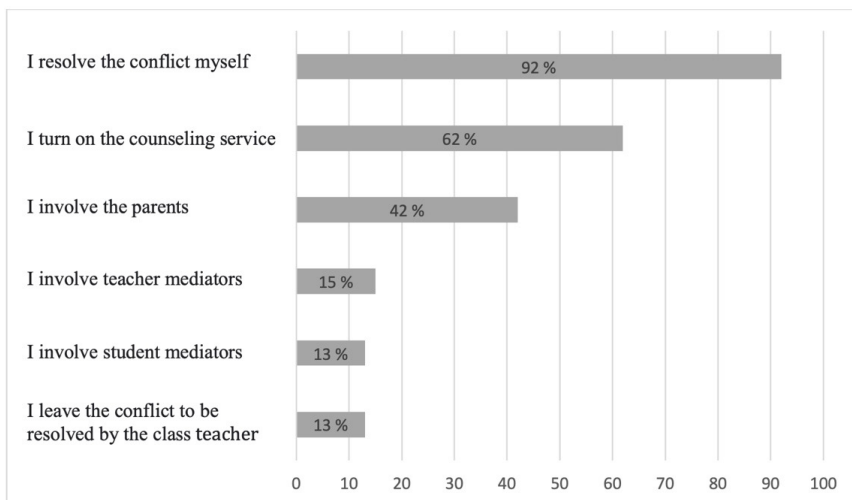
Figure 2
Teachers' Opinions about the Kind of Situations in Which Children Most Often Enter Conflict
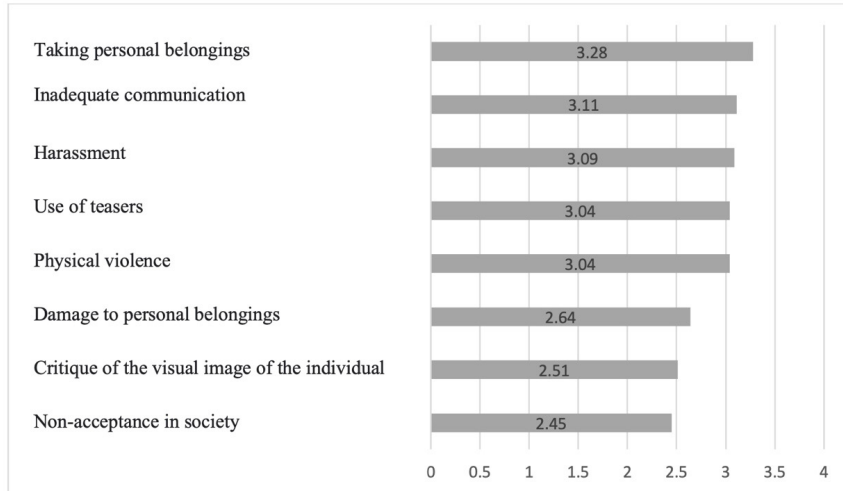
Teachers were asked who they most often involve in conflict resolution. As many as 92 % of teachers answered that they resolved the conflict on their own. In the event that teachers are unable to resolve the conflict on their own, they include a counselling service (62 %). 42 % of teachers involve parents in conflict resolution. However, only 28 % involve a teacher or student mediator (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Teachers' Opinions on the Most Common Way of Reacting upon Noticing a Conflict Situation

Teachers perceive classroom conflicts on their own (X= 3.15), or they are notified by children who are involved in conflict situations (X = 2.96), or they are notified by children who are not involved in conflict situations (X= 2.68) (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Teachers' Opinions on How they Perceive Conflict in the Classroom
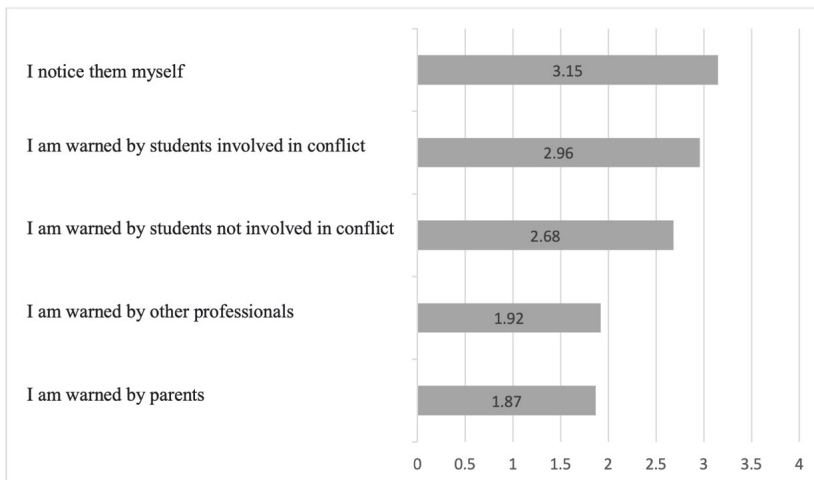
Once teachers notice a conflict situation, they first wait for the students to talk and then approach themselves (72 %). 57 % of teachers get involved immediately and talk to whoever is involved. 2 % of teachers calmly observe the conflict and let the situation resolve itself (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Teachers' Opinions on How they React upon Noticing a Conflict Situation
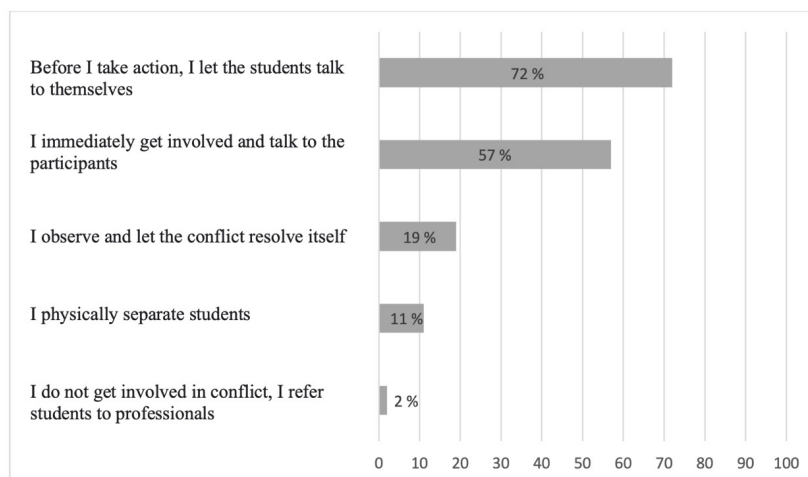
Developing positive values (X= 3.56) and fostering a positive attitude toward conflict resolution (X= 3.55) help to reduce conflicts in school. Other factors that contribute to the reduction of the number of conflicts include: a supportive school environment, common rules in the classroom, and talking about friendship and the introduction of positive discipline (Figure 6).

Figure 6
*Teachers' Opinions about What Reduces the Number of Conflicts*
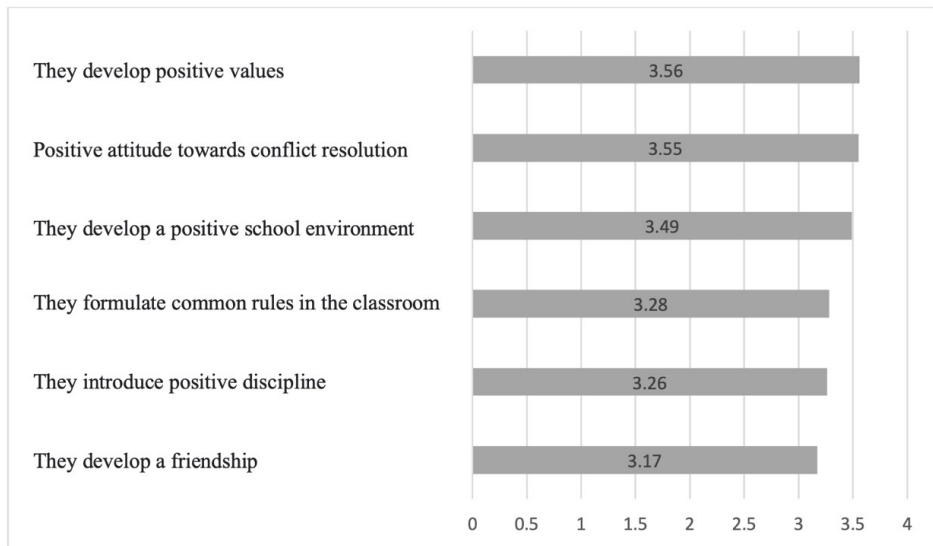
When teachers resolve a conflict, they discuss it with individuals or at the level of the whole classroom/department, or they inform the parents and a counselling service about the conflict. In the event of damage caused, students undergo restitution or teachers issue an official reprimand for them.

Teachers were asked to write down what they did in the school year 2020/2021 to reduce the number of conflicts in the classroom. Most teachers reported that they talked to the students, that they urged the students to develop a positive climate, and that they held thematic classes on the topic of friendship and mutual respect.

62.3 % of teachers reported that they were not competent in resolving conflicts. Only 37.7 % said that they had enough knowledge to resolve conflicts (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Teachers' Opinions about Their Competence in Resolving Conflict
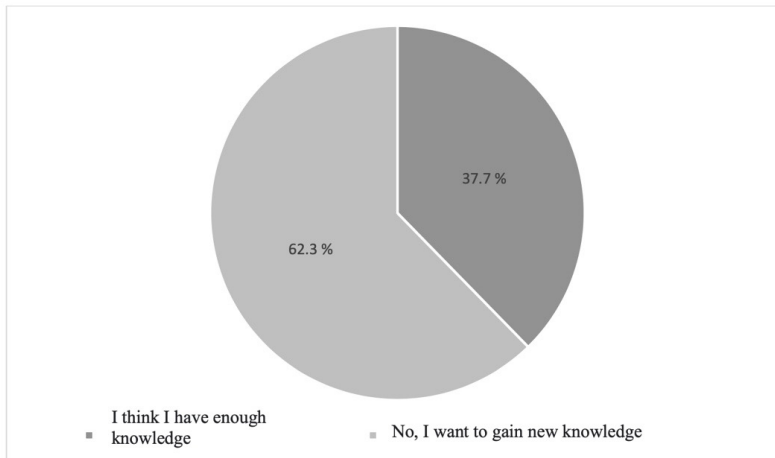
92 % of teachers reported that they gained the knowledge (strategies) for conflict resolution from their own experience. 87 % acquired the knowledge for conflict resolution through the exchange of opinions and experiences with their colleagues. 60 % acquired this kind of knowledge from specialist literature. The lowest share of teachers gained this kind of experience through specific trainings which they selected themselves, or to which they had been assigned by their institution (employer) (53 %) (Figure 8).

Figure 8
Teachers' Opinions on Where They Acquired Knowledge of Conflict Resolution Strategies
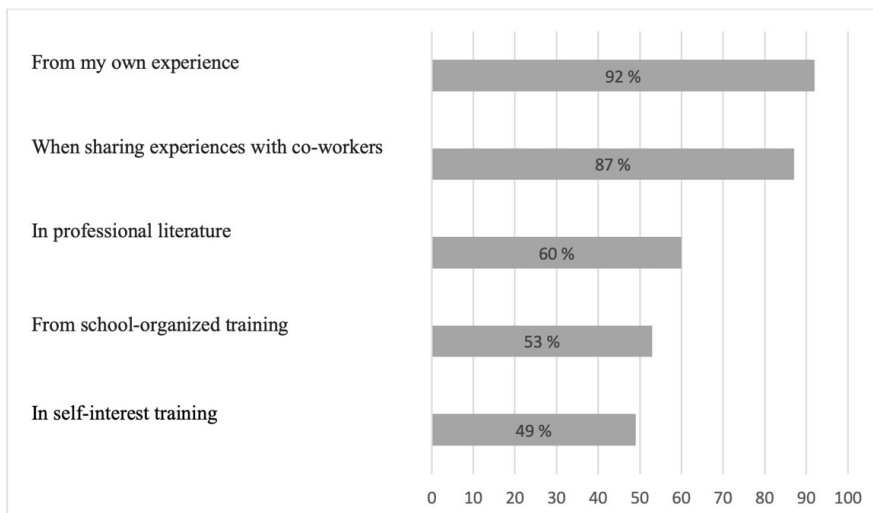
Teachers were then asked about what kind of problems they encountered in resolving conflicts. 53 % of teachers reported lacking time to resolve the conflict. 40 % felt that the conflict was too complex (difficult) for them to resolve on their own. Some teachers reported the students' parents intervening in conflict resolution, and some reported that they did not feel competent enough to resolve conflicts (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Teachers' Opinions about What Kind of Problems they Encounter in Resolving Conflicts
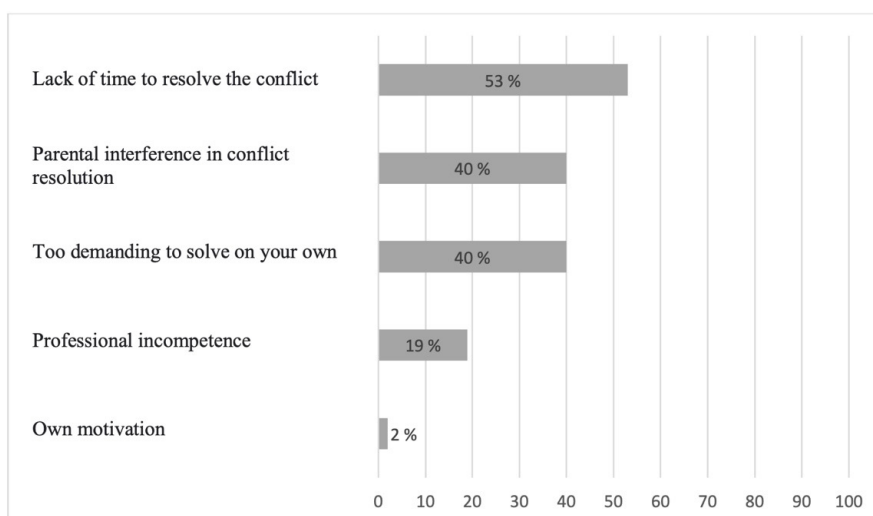
Discussion

Primary and lower secondary school teachers are aware that the school is an important institution where children not only acquire new knowledge but also gain experience on how to live in a community, which includes dealing with others' complaints, compromising, arriving to agreements, coordinating opinions, and resolving conflicts.

The survey conducted as part of this research analysed the teachers' opinions regarding what they would like to change in the process of conflict resolution. It was established that better collaboration with the school counselling services, immediate resolution of conflicts and less parent interference in school events would be necessary in order to achieve this. According to the teachers, conflicts would need to be resolved as soon as they occur. The problem is, however, that during the short breaks in between lessons, teachers are unable to resolve the conflict, which then continues. Regarding this, teachers emphasize the need for immediate involvement of the school counselling services and resolving conflicts in the shortest possible time. They also emphasize that resolving conflicts requires a positive attitude of all everyone involved, and, of course, the ability to compromise. All teachers are aware that parents generally tend to intervene in school events, which may interfere with successful conflict resolution. Parents take the side of their child and defend his/her interests. In such cases, the teacher must act as a mediator between the parents, instead

of acting as a mediator for the students. Teachers pointed out that they wish to see less interference on behalf of parents.

The results of the questionnaire as part of this research showed that teachers strive to minimize the number of conflicts. Teachers also provided constructive suggestions on what else could be done to resolve conflicts faster and more efficiently. In addition, the results of this research showed that teachers are motivated to learn more theoretical and practical knowledge on conflict resolution and to exchange experiences both at the institutional and wider regional level. Teachers emphasized that they would like to have more practical training in the field of peer mediation and communication. These issues were dealt with in the Erasmus+ project *Mediators and Peacemakers against Peer Victimization (MEPEV),* which has designed a set of educational materials (trainings) precisely for this purpose, both for teachers and students.

Conclusions

Life without conflicts would be boring. Conflicts bring diversity to our lives. Conflict awareness is a path to providing strategies for their resolution. Conflicts allow us to grow personally, gain new experiences and thus enrich and deepen our relationships with others. There is no simple recipe for conflict resolution because every situation is specific and requires a different kind of approach and strategy. This is why the perspectives of individuals and the exchange of good practice examples are valuable experiences, which should be used as a foundation for an efficient implementation of conflict resolution in practice. The ability of educators (teachers) to identify situations that provoke conflict often helps them to prevent conflicts, especially with students of the youngest age, as this can often prevent physical injuries. Introducing mediation skills to both children and adults is very helpful in various discussions and, in general, in resolving conflicts. In modern times, peer mediation is becoming more and more established, as an alternative to violent confrontation in the school space. In recognizing conflicts, it is important to allow each individual involved to present the situation from their own perspective.

The basic task of schools is not to prevent all conflicts but to teach children how to respond to them. Grown-ups should serve as an example. The role of educators is to educate and guide children, to provide suitable circumstances and to encourage children to resolve conflicts independently. Consistent implementation helps to raise awareness and internalize as well as adapt behaviour in a socially acceptable way. In this way, children will realize that each individual matters.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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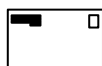**Tine Pajk**

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