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Continuing Teacher Training in Conflict Mediation: A Socio-Educational Strategy for the Current School

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Abstract: We are aware of the challenges affecting the present society, social and existential issues that follow. Being a teacher requires a permanent training in line with the latest societal developments and the evolution of knowledge. Both School and the teacher are expected to contribute to the student's integral education. The main objective of the present study was to analyze the contribution of continuing teacher training in conflict mediation and evaluate the performance of the mediating strategies in responding to the School's current socio-educational challenges. We have conducted a qualitative study, as there is still a need for significant theoretical scientific contributions to this subject. We gathered data through semi-structured interviews. Participants include nine teachers, aged between 33 years and 62 years, of both sexes, working as teachers in schools or groups of schools in the north of Portugal. The data analysis was done based on an analysis of content technique, according to the interview's codification upon the register units where we have determined categories and subcategories. The results show that continuing formation in conflict mediation is essential for upgrading and knowledge innovations, as well as for the development of new strategies leading to better professional practice. This training in mediation promotes the acquirement of skills required to deal with nowadays School's socioeducational challenges more easily. Furthermore, we found that there is a perfect association between socio-educational abilities developed in mediation and the ones that help students through their mandatory schooling journey.

Keywords: Continuing teacher training, Conflict mediation, Socio-educational skills

1. Introduction

Differences in opinions and interests may often lead to conflicts, and this type of manifestation is no exception in the school environment. According to Silva (2014), the "conflicts are constituent elements of human reality and, therefore, should be recognized in their different aspects: meaning, relevance, modes of recognition, appropriation and resolution". Conflict, discord and disagreements are inherent phenomena of living society. Considering situations of conflict are inevitable, it makes perfect sense to have an educational intervention to transform conflicts into opportunities for learning and personal growth.

The School, being also an area of socialization, functions as a training facility for educating scientifically and socially competent citizens. They can act effectively and responsibly in a continually evolving society. Citizenship education is one of the educational priorities of this early century. From the perspective of Pinto da Costa e Teles (2015), "citizenship implies ethical and social values that allow interaction in the community".

To respond to the constant social challenges occurring in the school context, teachers feel the need to enhance and innovate their knowledge tools, and therefore make use of continuous training (Mucharreira, 2018). In this context, training in conflict mediation can become an asset for professional teaching performance, as it contributes to the acquisition and promotion of skills and abilities that allow better management of interpersonal relationships as well as to use them in an educational way to promote students' relational skills.

Mediation contributes, as Pinto da Costa (2016, p. 13) notes, to the development of "basic social skills for community life". Mediation promotes constructive conflict resolution, as it allows for mutual recognition based on dialogue, active listening and otherness (Silva, 2018). Mediation in a school context is considered a methodology of interpersonal relationship management and conflict resolution that fosters the participation and responsibility of the school community. It provides an opportunity to engage in new forms of communication and social interaction, promoting human rights. It supports a harmonious coexistence facilitating the teaching and learning process.

To better understand how teachers can find mediation as a useful strategy to deal with the social and relational challenges facing school citizens, the following starting question was formulated: How does continuous training in conflict mediation and the teacher's engaging in this training contribute to responding to the socio-educational challenges of the current School? To the extent that it aims to understand and find meaning through the narratives of the interviewed teachers (based on their perceptions, opinions and evaluations), the adoption a qualitative method with inductive and interpretative nature, allowed a greater insight into the socio-educational reality identified for the study.

2. Teacher and the Challenges of the 21st - Century School

The teaching of elites has given way to mass education. The School that guaranteed future success and social position became compulsory and is discredited. Faced with diversity, plurality and multiculturalism, the School seeks to provide orientation to its educational mission. The world in which we live today poses new challenges to education. We live in a global society with rapidly changing economic, technological, communication and cultural expression, as well as interpersonal relationships. Thus, according to França (2018), the School, as a privileged place for learning, has to ensure the construction of knowledge in times of rapid and unpredictable change. In this follow-up, the School's mission is to foster awareness and intellectual curiosity, to form citizens capable of collaborative action for the construction of a sustainable future (Santos & Leal, 2017). All these changes pose challenges to teachers. Mucharreira (2018) states that the challenges teachers face are increasingly complex and diverse and that there is a growing need for training.

The competencies students leaving compulsory School have to acquire for the 21st-century, as disclosed in an official national document, are a set of knowledge, attitudes and values that should prepare them for school, personal, professional and community life (Veras, 2017). Nowadays, the teacher must be able to teach students what they need to learn to become active and aware citizens, capable of analyzing, reflecting and participating in the society in which they live (Silva, 2014). It is required that the teacher has the competence to work from a problem-solving perspective and to develop projects encouraging students to mobilize their knowledge effectively and cooperatively. For this, the teacher must also adopt a reflective attitude about his practices, context and his interactions to prepare better to act as an educator.

2.1 Continuous Teacher Training as a Response to the Challenges of the 21st-Century School

Teachers are professionals in human development, and this highlights the importance of continuous training plays in professional and educational success. Teacher training is an indispensable factor for change in several areas, such as education, professional conceptions and teaching professionalism. According to Canário (2006), there is a need to promote the adaptation, enhancement and innovation of teaching practices from initial and continuing training. According to the author, "school is the place where teachers learn the essentials of their profession since this learning corresponds to a process of professional socialization" (Idem, p. 65). Teacher training takes place in a working context, and it comprises of training and the identity-building aspects. The teacher must be more than mere knowledge transmitter. He must be a "constructor of meaning" (Idem, p. 69). Teachers' primary mission is to help build knowledge by using different sources of information and appropriate pedagogical practices, often acquired through continuous training (França, 2018).

The teacher is considered to be an agent of change in the school community, and this requires him to grow in political awareness and pedagogical function. For the growth to take place, the teacher needs to continually be in touch with his technical-pedagogical competence (Freitas & Pacifico, 2020). This continuous adaptation to which the teacher is subject, requiring responsiveness to the students' and society' demands, falls within the concept of lifelong learning/training from a formal (continuous training), non-formal or informal perspective (Martins, 2017). Working in teams and working by projects that differentiate in pedagogical approaches are imposing diverse responsibilities. For instance, dimensions related to teachers' performance in battling against school failure and contributing to citizenship development have recourse on the research and reflective practice (Gonzalez & Lopez, 2017).

Continuous teacher training is related to education and teaching quality. Continuous training enables teachers to perform

better pedagogically. They draw from strategies promoting students' success, and training raises their awareness of the changes in the school community, thus allowing them to encourage students' integral development and facilitating their integration into society. Consequently, continuous training (specialized or transversal) should be considered from the knowledge enhancement perspective, with an emphasis on promoting the skills necessary for adequate professional performance in the School and societal context. Through in-service training, teachers seek to deepen the knowledge and skills that support, for example, social integration, employability and students' citizenship behaviour.

2.2 Continuous Training of Teachers in Conflict Mediation

Continuous training in conflict mediation enables teachers to enhance their skills and abilities for the constructive and transformative resolution of disputes through communication, active listening and mutual respect, promoting autonomy and accountability and providing the School with an improved social climate. Skills in the fields of knowledge, knowhow and social and real-world knowledge can be enhanced through participation in the mediation process, but above all through training in mediation.

Teacher training in conflict mediation focuses on school problems, values the experiences of students and teachers, is articulated with the quality of school life, presents a potential for improving interpersonal relationships and the teaching-learning process, and can be reflected both in better student achievement and in higher, as well as improved teachers' professional performance. A constructivist vision is preferred in this type of training, as it proceeds from contextualized reflection for the assembly of socio-educational devices of interaction, communication and pedagogy processes.

From the perspective of Monteiro ande Cunha (2018, p. 125), he who assumes the role of a mediation agentr "has as his main desideratum (and challenge) the alteration of a cultural paradigm, contrary to the current one of competitive and punitive nature, when it comes to dealing with the conflict". This change presupposes a cooperative culture based on democratic values and the exercise of citizenship. Overall, the entire educational community can benefit in a preventive, educational, collective and organizational way if the School uses conflict mediation to intervene to address problems of coexistence. Such practices help in the creation of better socialization and integral education environment. Mediation in school context refers to processes of social (re)construction, educational process and a way of creating a healthy coexistence (Pinto da Costa, 2019).

3. Methodology

The qualitative approach adopted in the current study is suitable for understanding the problem in question. According to Amado (2016, p. 57), this research methodology promotes the reflexive capacity of the researcher, facilitating the understanding of reality and giving more confidence in the "how" and in the "why" of the research object and process, and thus understanding and interpretation of the meanings of subjectivities and interactions that developing through the course of the study. Qualitative research assumes a naturalistic, interpretative and inductive dimension.

3.1 Objectives

The general objective of the study is to evaluate the contribution of continuous teacher training as a strategic response to the socio-educational challenges of today's schooling. As specific objectives it is intended:

- i) Recognize teachers' needs in conflict mediation training;
- ii) To analyze how teachers evaluate in-service training in conflict mediation;
- iii) To examine teachers' performance concerning the training in conflict mediation.

3.2 Participants

The research sample consists of six female and three male individuals, aged between 33 and 62, belonging to five unassembled School Groupings/Schools in the northern part of the country and one teacher (who had not been able to get a school placement). All the participants finished training in conflict mediation, and the time since they had done it varied between one to ten years.

Table 1: Description of study participants

PA1	PA2	PA3	PA4	PA5	PA6	PA7	PA8	PA9
53	51	51	36	52	62	33	61	60
Female	Male.	Female	Male	Female	Male.	Female	Female	Female
English	Portuguese	Natural	Arts and	Physical	Physics	Philosophy	Portuguese	History
and		Sciences	technologies	Chemistry	Education			
German								
±10	±2 Years	±2 years	±1 year	±2 years	±1 year	±4 years	±5 Years	±5
years								years

3.3 Method and Procedure

Data were collected through the semi-structured interview. The interview aims to obtain relevant and detailed information about a theme, phenomenon or problem, also allowing a better understanding of the relationship between facts. The interview enables deepening subjects that require further explanation from the individuals involved in the actions, processes, decisions and contexts. The interview script was carefully prepared. Thus, a set of questions was organized with regards to the objectives of the investigation and, specifically, the categories extracted from the literature review. According to Flick (2005, p. 78), "the conception of the script and its conduction must obey four criteria: non-direction, specificity, amplitude and depth, and also attention to the personal context of the interviewee". The fulfilment of such criteria allows the researcher to obtain precious data about the subject of study. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. For data analysis, the technique of content analysis was used, which, according to Bardin (1995), aims to convert an extensive text into a set of content categories, and the category system must be objective and reliable since only then it is guaranteed that the investigation produces valid results. Thus, we opted for a codification of registration units of interview texts, according to a previous categorization and categorization that emerged as a consequence of the analytical and interpretative data exploration. The anonymity of the participants in our study was safeguarded concerning the ethical issues of the research.

4. Analysis of Results

4.1 Motivations for Further Training in Conflict Mediation

The analysis of the results obtained through the interviews (n=9) allowed us to infer that the teachers interviewed sought to carry out continuous training in conflict mediation according to the following points:

- (i) school is different: "... because the school has changed..." (PA8), "... for all the problems of today's kids..." (PA4);
- (ii) to deepen knowledge for intervening in school indiscipline: "to be aware that there were disciplinary problems" (PA1), "about issues of indiscipline..." (PA6);
- (iii) enhance strategies for responding to social problems at School: "...we felt the need to deepen our knowledge" (PA6), "...we felt this need, ...we realized that there was a need to complement our formation" (PA8), "...we felt this need to do the formation..." (PA9), "...learn...how to act and deal with kids and solve situations" (PA9).

Thus, the perception of the social problems of the current School, as denounced by the teachers, is an explanation of the motivation to continue the training in conflict mediation.

4.2 Assessment of Further Training in Conflict Mediation

The teachers (n=9) gave a positive assessment of the ongoing training in conflict mediation, as the following testimonies point out: "it was very positive" (PA1), "very positive, very interesting" (PA2), "very good" (PA3), "... I was immensely pleased...". (PA4), "It was very beneficial" (PA5), "it was such that my colleague and I... started applying it right away" (PA6), "Positively" (PA7), "Very good, I liked the training..." (PA8), "Very good. I liked it. I really liked it" (PA9).

Positive teachers' evaluation results from the usefulness of the tools acquired in training, for example:

i) training in dealing with various situations and actors in the school community: "It was an added value, it gives us tools to act..." (PA1), "helps us to deal with students, to deal with colleagues" (PA1), "gives us tools to deal with students and people in a different way" (PA1), helped me a lot (...) (PA8), "... we start applying right away. We started applying right away" (PA6), "We liked it so much that we decided to bring it here. It was an added value" (PA9);

- ii) continuous application of the techniques: "Currently I am still trying to put this training into practice..." (PA2), "is still very present" (PA8);
- iii) the possibility of working on concrete situations in the classroom and the various school spaces: "... continues to serve as a motto to keep in mind in the classroom itself and the playground, in the spaces where I meet the students" (PA2);
- iv) positive appreciation that they made at the time of formation and now: "for us to act not only in the short term but also in the long term" (PA1), "Today this formation continues to make a lot of sense" (PA3), "Today I continue to evaluate in the same way" (PA4), "Now also positive" (PA7), "It was an added value and continues to be so" (PA9);
- v) confidence to act in problematic situations; "it helped me a lot and gave me (...) on the one hand more confidence, but on the other hand, an enormous responsibility" (PA3), "although I am no longer as stuck as I was at the beginning and I ... not running away from the fundamental principles I have already arranged my way of being and solving problems with them" (PA3). In short, the professors interviewed evaluated the training in mediation as being very good/positive, both after its realization and in the present at the time of the interview, giving it a practical and useful vocation for the socioprofessional context.

4.3 Teacher's Performance with Training in Conflict Mediation

As long as social interactions occur, conflicts may arise in which mediators may have to intervene. Thus, we attempted to understand the type of mediation that the teacher with mediation training performs at School. Three interviewees (PA1, PA2, PA3) shared that the teacher acts in the management of conflicts between the various actors of the school community, with predominance in situations of conflict between students:

"In cases of mediation between students, student-student, between class-teacher, and between teacher-class. Therefore, basically between student-student and class-teacher. Between class-student, I know situations in which there is a rejection or discrimination of a student or behaviour that should not exist in the class, either an attitude towards a student, or behaviour that should not exist between the class towards a teacher or between two students" (PA1). "(...) the concrete situation of conflicts between students and very few between students and teachers, but it is more among students..." (PA2). "Almost always among students, but I've also acted in a student-employee and student-teacher situation, but to the lesser extent" (PA3).

Mediation between students is not confined to the office space, where formal mediation is done. Two respondents (PA5 and PA7) reported that they performed informal mediation in other areas, such as during breaks and in the classroom: "With my classes, with other students during the breaks, I realized that something is wrong, or they also bring out situations from other classes" (PA7). "With situations already booked here in the office or with informal mediations in the recesses and breaks" (PA5).

Data analysis shows that teachers practice conflict mediation in various contexts and interpersonal dynamics. Teachers favour mutual listening and cooperation, promoting a symbolic space for non-violent communication and the construction of shared understandings. As Quinquiolo (2017) says, the mediating teacher must build a favourable means for students to recognize and understand problem situations and to act to resolve them.

The nine interviewees (n=9) also shared the opinion that the role of the mediating teacher in the mediation service class helps to improve the school climate, in several aspects:

- i) the very existence of the mediation service, which demonstrates a commitment to a culture of peace: "It helps to improve the School in two aspects, in the perception that the students have as a school culture ... they know that there is a space that has the door open for those more fragile students ... On the other hand, the aggressors themselves are the kids who have/live these conflicts, also know that they have space where, if they are interested, can work towards resolving some postures and some relationships, essentially that they have space where they will not be punished, but that helps them become better kids, better citizens ..." (PA2);
- ii) the collaborative and non-violent methodology of managing interpersonal relationships and conflicts that are implemented at School: "... helps a lot because when kids come here, they know that it is a space where they are at ease to say what they feel, they are not punished, ...they are listened to...they are at ease, to tell the truth..." (PA5). "It helps straight away because it makes it possible to resolve situations in a more consensual way" (PA6). "It helps to improve because it helps students to think of an alternative to the violent resolution of all problems..." (PA3);

iii) the teamwork and the good interaction that is intended to spread from the conflict mediation serviceoffice: "the office, when it works, creates some relationship both between the team and between the students themselves. Most of the cases will end up successfully solved. When things are successful, they become easier. I think mediation is facilitating" (PA6).

Teachers trained in mediation, whether or not implemented the practice in mediation services offices, allowed us to verify, in agreement with Martins et al. (2016, p. 586), that interpersonal relationship in the educational community "has undergone positive changes". As in another study on teacher training in conflict mediation by Pinto da Costa e Sá (2019), it is confirmed that teachers apply conflict mediation from pre-school to High School, enabling the educator/teacher to assume a central socio-educational role in the school environment.

5. Conclusion

The school institution has transformed with the pace of societal changes. The human heterogeneity, along with significant technological and digital transformations, also present in schools, requires teachers to possess the knowledge and professional skills that were not acquired through initial training (Ribeiro, 2017). However, there are skills that can only be obtained in a working context through "professional socialization" (Canário, 2006), either through the experience of everyday school life or through continuous training focused on real issues. The continuous professionalization of teachers is justified not only by the need for enhancement, improvement and innovation but also by the very nature of the education system, which has been undergoing successive changes to meet societal challenges. Thus, teachers' training should take into account the contemporary problems and aim towards competent professionalism capable of responding to the challenges of professional and personal daily life. It should equip teachers with tools and strategies to shape students to autonomous citizens, employing critical, reflexive, responsible and constructive intervening in society. From this perspective, we define the main objective of the study as evaluating the contribution of continuous teacher training in conflict mediation. Thus, the research carried out allowed us to recognize that:

- i) teachers' motivations to train in conflict mediation, stressing the need to update knowledge and action strategies, since the public attending school is changing, and problems related to indiscipline arise more often. It was understood that teachers had as their primary objective acquiring of socio-educational skills to be better prepared to face the socioeducational challenges of school life.
- ii) continuous training in conflict mediation, theoretical and practical and preferably in context, constitutes an added value for teachers, who evaluated it positively, transporting the skills and abilities acquired to professional practice. They find the methodology of socio-educational intervention practicable after training, not only as a technique but also as a culture of dealing with school social interactions.
- iii) the teacher with a background in conflict mediation acts more frequently in student-student conflicts and, to a lesser extent, between student-teacher and class-teacher, including informal mediations during breaks. It is confirmed that continuous training in conflict mediation reinforces teachers' role in the socio-educational promotion of school coexistence. By managing interpersonal relations and conflicts, the teacher is exercising his mission as an educator of young citizens living in society. In this context, the teacher assumes a new role – a mediation agent.

The School, and consequently, the teacher, is faced with a wide-ranging action in which it is crucial to know how to combine the transmission of scientific knowledge with social learning intelligently. The adaptation and improvement of educational practice have become a necessity, if not a requirement, for the teacher as a member of a global society undergoing constant change. To this extent, teacher training is a means of renewing skills that best enables them to work with all students according to their real possibilities. It is about better responding to the objectives of inclusive education and educational improvement.

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