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Facing conflicts and violence in schools - a proposal for a new occupation: the mediation counsellor

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Abstract

The present work aims to frame a proposal for a new occupation, equally associated with counselling and conflict management in Romanian educational settings. The study was conducted with Romanian school counsellors, through a series of focus-groups followed by a questionnaire-based survey. The findings suggest that proposing a new occupation, namely the mediation counsellor, answers the needs for specialized handling of conflicts and violence within the educational community. The school counselling practitioners who participated in data collection expressed their concerns regarding the frequency, the types and depth of potential conflicts in educational institutions, as well as their need for further training in conflict management. These findings support the intention of proposing the mediation counsellor as a specialized professional in the aforementioned directions, expected to collaborate with all educational actors for preventing school conflicts and violence.

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1. Introduction

School violence is a complex phenomenon determined by individual (hyperactivity, socio-cognitive deficit, depression, favorable attitudes towards violence), family (abuse, lack of parental involvement, excessive permissiveness, punitive practices, excessive or fluctuating family attachment, family conflict, substance abuse, separating parents - children), school (school failure, weak attachment to school, absenteeism, frequent change of

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school, behavioral problems, lack of academic motivation, delinquency in the peer group, isolation from peers, conflicts with peers) and social risk factors (poverty, disorganized family, community exposure to violence and racism) (Debarbieux, 2010; Jigău, Liiceanu and Preuteasa, 2006; Stan, 2008).

Understanding the extent and manifestation of conflict and violence phenomena in the Romanian context is hindered by the lack of national and comprehensive statistics. Although scarce and generally conducted on small samples, studies on school violence conducted in our country indicate that conflicts and violence phenomena occur most frequently between students. However, the attention of researchers and policy makers in understanding this phenomena comprehensively and to create adequate prevention and intervention programs – including peer mediation programs aimed at reducing violence, bullying and improving school climate, has been much faint than in other countries, where events such as those that took place at Columbine, Sandy Hooks Schools or Virginia Tech University called for more intensified prevention-based concerns for increasing school safety (for more information, see Moore, Jones and Broadbent, 2008; Smith, 2003).

School violence incidents include insults, quarrels, humiliations regarding the physical and the psychological particularities, the socio-economic status, the ethnical or religious affiliation and fights. Violence acts are mainly verbal and occur more often in schools with ethnic minorities and from peripheral areas (Jigău 2006, Jigău et al., 2006). These studies suggest that these phenomena arise mostly during the breaks, but also during the classes, within classrooms, hallways and also in close proximity of the school. Student's violence towards teachers has a greater variability, from none to 60% in some schools, with greater frequency in urban schools (p. 47), high schools and vocational schools and is manifested as truancy, indiscipline, ignoring the transmitted messages, refusal to accomplish the school assignments and ironical/ sarcastic attitudes but also insults, humiliations even physical aggressions (Jigău et al., 2006). The study indicates also that there are some cases of teachers' acts of violence directed towards students, manifested as verbal aggression, subjectivity in evaluation, nonverbal aggression (ignoring students, threatening gestures and discriminatory attitudes). Muntean and Munteanu (2011) also report a greater frequency of verbal violence, covering 90% of the cases, with students most often as aggressors, followed by parents and school staff. However, there are some inadequacies between the results of these studies and the statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, which reveal a greater preponderance for the acts of physical aggression. This may be due to the fact that schools tend to report mainly the more severe cases that usually consist of physical violence, ignoring the verbal, everyday aggressions, which are more characteristic for the typical school climate in Romanian educational institutions.

The perpetuation of these phenomena led to the emergence of local and national initiatives directed towards their reduction. For instance the Ministry of Education elaborated the *Strategy of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports on reducing the phenomenon of school violence* (certified by the MO no. 1409/29.06.2007), doubled by *The Strategy regarding school safety* conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). These initiatives were reflected mainly in organizational measures, such as creating the county committees/task forces for violence prevention and control, elaboration and implementation of plans and rapports to monitor the way these measures reach their objectives. MIA's strategy nominated a police worker for each school that should be responsible with the prevention and control at the institution level and collaborates with the security personnel employed by the school to ensure safety. The persistence of acts of violence and the county reports on the inadequate training of the teaching staff to adequately treat them suggests the necessity of introducing in the educational system of specialized professionals in counselling and management of conflict and violence situations. With these caveats of the present system in mind, we intended to explore the perceptions of school counsellors and other education professionals on the ways school conflicts and violence-related phenomena could be efficiently prevented and reduced. In the following section, we will briefly present the methodology and results of the qualitative and quantitative studies we employed, using the focus group, interview and survey techniques.

2. Methodology

Two types of opinion elicitation and exploration techniques, focus groups and interviews, were used for data collection, conducted in January 2014, with three groups of 32 counsellors, three directors of County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance (CCERA) from Bucuresti, Iași and Vaslui. The groups were selected from counsellors from the CCERAs. Participants were given information regarding the objectives of the study.

The second part of the study was aimed at gaining a more refined view of the research questions, aimed towards shaping a possible occupational profile of the mediation counsellor. Since focus group data are susceptible to a set of limitations and biases, given by the influence of the facilitator and more vocal participants (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook, 2007), we decided to extract more information, from a larger sample of counsellor from an extended sample. The survey was collected on 181 professional from the pre-university system from three counties (Iași, Vaslui, Mureș), from areas with several problems previously reported as predictors of the problems under scrutiny (socio-economic problems such as family unemployment and poverty, ethnic compositions). 64% were school counsellors, 0,6% social workers, 13,5% special education professionals and speech therapists; the rest of 21,9% were teachers of several specializations. 51,5% of respondents had bachelor degrees, 46,9% held a Master degree and 0,6% received a PhD. The sample included professionals from all levels of professional experience. The gender composition reflected the already established tendency towards feminization of the didactic profession, with 86,5% female and 13,5% male teachers.

The survey was conducted during January and February 2014, the instrument being built upon the results gathered from the previous, qualitative stage of the research. The questionnaire was composed of 42 multiple choice items, 3 multiple choice items and one open question. For the fixed-answer questions, respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*). The questions explored six themes, organized in distinct sections: the socio-educational context with respect to school violence and the dynamics of conflict (4 items), responsibilities and professional activities suitable for the mediation counsellor (15 items), competences (11 items), subordination and coordination work relations (4 items), initial and continuous professional training (3 items), indicators for the evaluation of the mediator counsellor's activity (one open-ended question). Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous; the questionnaires were administered in individual and collective sessions, during the weekly meetings with participants from the CCERAs.

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative research. Focus groups and interviews

Data were analyzed based on the transcripts and notes took by the focus group assistant, following the main objectives of the study and the structure of the employed instruments, namely the focalized and structured interview guides. A thematic analysis of the answers, corresponding to the main sections of the research instruments was employed.

Most of the interviewed counsellors and CCERAs' directors agreed that violence and conflicts are continuously raising but there are also some opinions that the two phenomena are exaggerated by the mass media. Verbal aggression is considered the most frequent form of violence in schools, including humiliation, bullying, intimidation or blackmail. Most responders agree that physical altercations are rare. The most frequent are conflicts between students or between students and teachers. Among the risk factors for the phenomena, the most commonly invoked were: the age range, the area and type of school (high schools and vocational schools situated in peripheral areas), the presence of minority students, the number of pupils in a class, parents' level of education and mentalities regarding schooling, teacher's conflict-inducing attitudes and practices and the rigidity of the school system.

Also, respondents suggest that the emphasis is put on punitive, punishment-based interventions in cases of violence that are of low impact. There is an expressed need to convert the present procedures into more positive, long-term approaches, such as developing communication, social and emotional competence skills.

Also, there is a common agreement regarding the scarcity of resources for adequate violence prevention and conflict management. The participants believe that there are many reasons for the existing staffs are not able to address the phenomena in a time efficient and thorough manner. The most commonly invoked reasons were the lack of an adequate set of rules and procedures for intervention, especially crisis management procedures, scarce time and human resources, weak coordination between school personnel and other institutions and authorities. Consequently, the roles of the mediation counsellor should answers these issues, including:

- development and introduction a methodology for the identification of violence causes and procedures for monitoring of conflict, diagnosis of the school climate and training need analysis for students and teachers;

- elaboration of specific work procedures, interventions plans in schools and offering consultancy to school staff;
- development of prevention programs oriented towards conflict resolution and management, extracurricular activities, addressed to students, teachers and parents; these should be integrated in a systemic, whole-school long-term strategy, based on collaboration between several institutions and professionals;
- applying the existing regulations regarding prevention of, response in and recovery after incidents;
- the promotion of mediation counsellors' activity and making his role visible and credible;
- counselling interventions in conflict and violence situations within school settings;
- assisting teachers and students in managing conflict situations and developing a healthy school climate through promotion of positive interpersonal relationships;
- addressing the family-school relation in tackling violence;
- focusing on partnerships and collaboration with other institutions and the larger community (law enforcement, local administration, social and medical services);
- psychological counselling, even psychotherapy to reduce socio-emotional and behavioral deficits.

As potential benefits of introducing the new occupation, participants list the following aspects: covering a poorly attended area, reducing the frequency and conflicts and violent acts, improving students' outcomes, in terms of motivation and academic performance, improvement of the school climate, supporting and developing the skills of teachers, the presence of a specialized professional responsible for these issues. Also, there were some disadvantages of the inclusion the mediation counsellor in schools, such as casting a negative light over the institutions that request this sort of assistance, that could become vulnerable to labels such as being a "problem school", overcharging student's schedules, the difficulty of convincing the potential beneficiaries to attend extracurricular activities, confusions and overlaps with other related specialists in the school, such as school counsellors, educational psychologists or school mediators, thus overloading the organizational structure and increasing bureaucracy.

In the section regarding the competencies and their limits, participants listed as the most important: psycho-relational skills (e.g. efficient communication, empathy, objectivity and self-control), conflict management skills, crisis management, planning and organizing specific activities. These could be acquired, as suggested by the participants, through initial studies in socio-humanistic domain, followed by post-graduate training in conflict mediation or conflict mediation in education; teaching experience is also considered important. Some consider that another option would be a master's degree in clinical psychology and psychotherapy.

3.2. *Questionnaire-based survey*

The quantitative data was subjected to a descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS software to obtain an overview of the participant's perspectives on the six aspects presented previously in the description of the research instrument.

3.2.1. *Social and educational context of the mediation counsellor work activity*

The answers to the first set of items revealed that a significant part of the respondents in our study consider that there is an increased rate of conflicts and violence acts in schools (75,4%) and 87,2% claim that there is a need to supplement the resources needed for the prevention, monitoring and management of these phenomena. Over a half of the total number of respondents (57%) claim that the personnel from the CCERA doesn't benefit from sufficient time to effectively address the aforementioned issues. Also, 84,3% agree that the personnel needs supplementary professional training to design and implement specific activities for the conflict management and violence control (Fig. 1.).

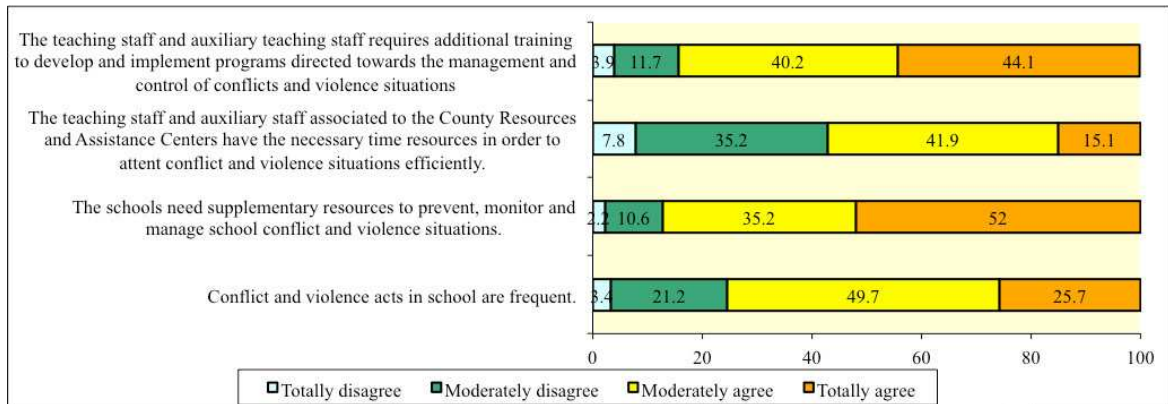


Fig. 1. Perceptions on social and educational context of the mediation counsellor work activity

3.2.2. Professional responsibilities and activities for the mediation counsellor

Participants rated the following activities, in the order of their perceived importance (Fig. 2.): collaboration with other specialists, participation to continuous training, conflict monitoring, individual and group counselling activities for conflict and post-conflict situation, facilitation of nonviolent communication in the educational environment and evaluation of risk situations. Activities that address the issues indirectly, such as those oriented towards changing family perceptions and parental practices, adult educational programs for the school staff or the dissemination of information about children's rights in the school, in the family and in the community, were regarded as less important.

3.2.3. Competences of the mediation counsellor

Based on the respondents' opinions, general competencies are ranked as follows: efficient interpersonal and institutional communication (76,5% of the participants totally agree), collaboration with specialists in multidisciplinary teams (76,5%), psycho-relational competencies (76%), personal development and career management (56,4%) and integrating IT&C in professional activities (45,4%). The following specific competencies are considered the most important by the majority of the participants: school violence and conflict prevention and control, diagnosis of these phenomena in the school, implementation and evaluation of prevention and intervention programs.

3.2.4. Subordination and coordination relations

The majority of the participants consider that the mediation counsellor should be part of the CCERA organizational structure, with 60,3% proposing this option. However, the other listed options also met a raised percent of agreement (41,3% - subordination to the City Hall or to the County Council, 43% - to the Police, 46,4% – to the school, or to the NGOs – 52%). The main collaborators of the mediation counsellor would be the school counsellor (82,7% totally agree), school psychologist (82%), the teaching staff (79,9%) and the school mediator (78,8%).

3.2.5. Initial and continuous training of the mediation counsellor

Participants mostly agreed that the initial training of the mediation counsellor should be a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Educational Sciences, with a smaller proportion considering that a degree in a socio-humanistic domain should be sufficient. More than a half of the participants (54,2%) indicated that a master's degree in conflict mediation in education is the best professionalization route for the mediation counsellor, followed by the option of taking a continuous training course in counseling and educational mediation (50,8%). 33,5% of the participants agreed that the occupation needs professional experience between 1 and 3 years in the school system, but 22,9% of

the respondents indicated that 3 to 5 years in teaching should be the minimal experience required for entering this profession.

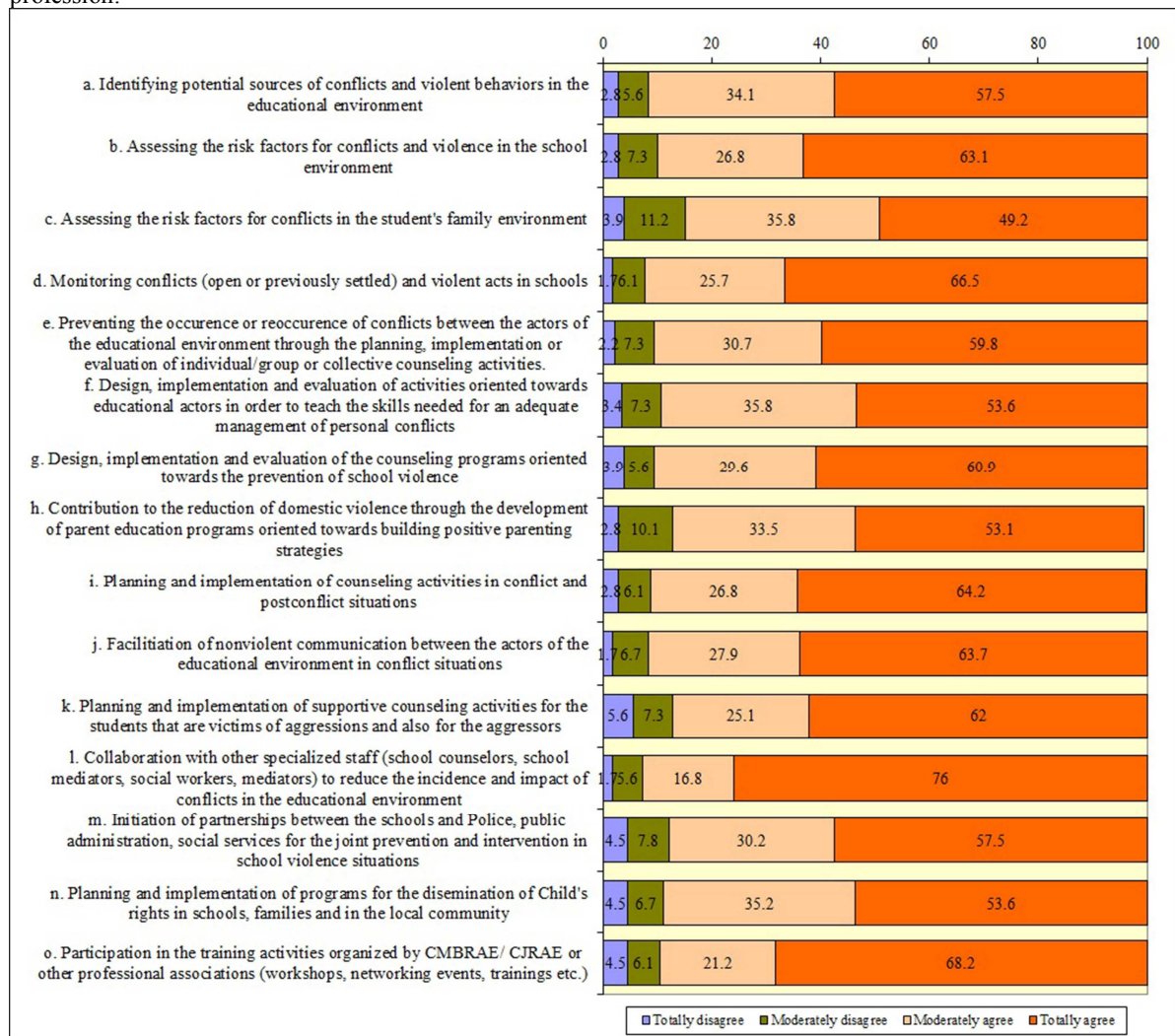


Fig. 2. Professional responsibilities and activities for the mediation counsellor

3.2.6. Evaluation of the mediation counsellor's professional activity

Fifty eight of the respondents answered the open ended question regarding the possible evaluation indicators for this job. Some of the gathered answers regard numerical indicators: number of attended cases, number and quality of the employed programs for the prevention and control of school violence, reducing conflict incidence and violence acts in school, total number of beneficiaries, number of individual, group and collective counselling activities, number of partnerships with other institutions and specialists, number of professional development programs attended. Another set of answers are organized around possible methodology for evaluating the counsellor's work: portfolios (including activity projects, counseling evaluation sheets, partnerships), self-evaluation forms (including number of beneficiaries, projects, training sessions, counselling activities), statistical reports, collegial observations, evaluation reports elaborated by the Administration Council. A third set of answers regard specific evaluation

instruments: questionnaires (feed-back or satisfaction surveys completed by the beneficiaries, colleagues and partners), activity evaluation forms, evaluation reports and self-reports etc.

4. Conclusions

Results supported the literature review regarding the increasing risk of violence and conflict in school settings, especially in certain environments and age groups. Analyses also suggested that there is an acute need for the supplementation of the human and logistic resources needed for prevention and reduction of school conflict and violence phenomena. This could be made through the extension of the school organizational chart with the inclusion of specialized professionals who would be responsible for the preventive and post-conflict intervention. The resulting occupational profile of the mediation counsellor should be designed as an aid for the systems struggle with violence and conflict phenomena, in the context of reduced resources currently in the educational institutions. According to the respondents in both the qualitative and quantitative studies, the counselling professionals are already overcharged with activities concerning educational and vocational counselling, and prevention and control of risk behaviors. The competency structure that emerged from the participant's answers insists on the importance of collaboration with other specialists in multidisciplinary teams, career management and diagnosing the risk for school violence and conflicts in school, prevention programmers and counselling for the effective management of personal conflicts and remedial interventions after the occurrence of violent acts, oriented towards both with victims and the aggressors. Participants tend to agree that the initial formation should be in Psychology and Educational Sciences, followed by a master's degree in conflict mediation in education and/or a continuous training program in this domain, covering at least 84 hours. Additionally, attention should be directed towards developing programs aimed at staff development, especially for refining communication and conflict resolution skills and raising awareness among the students and community members regarding conflicts and conflict-related resources. Summing these results, the answers obtained through interviews and the questionnaire-based survey advocate the proposal of a new occupation, that of mediation counsellor, an educational actor especially trained and focused on preventing and reduction school conflicts and violence.

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