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Summary

LIVING TOGETHER IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

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The research (1) aims to discover the strategies used by schools in building positive relationships and in maintaining them in different situations and contexts. It pays special attention to proactive actions carried out by schools to solve the problems and conflicts they come across. The main conviction to be tested is that internal school variables such as the implication of students on what's going on in schools are critical for the creation of a safe and ordered environment. External variables like social class and family background do influence school activities but are not "per se" the key basis for school environment.

The research theoretical framework looks at different references to pin down the concept of positive "living together" (positive discipline, positive relationship and positive climate) putting aside in the first place the studies with negative connotations like violence in schools, bullying and other discourses on disruptive school behaviours. The following proactive clusters of variables were considered relevant to the research:

- Schools as units of educational performance act either by action or by omission in the personal and social development of students, modelling habits of behaviour and of interpersonal relationship, forming beliefs and attitudes and helping to clarify the values that guide the behaviours. Puig Rovira (1996), Elias, M. J. y otros (1997); Munn, P. y otros (1992), Ayestarán (1994), Fdez García (2001), Ball (1989), Ortega y Mora (2000)...
- Different research reports provide evidence of the importance of "school and classroom climate" in the achievement of students. Climate is not a given characteristic of organizations, but it is built through different deliberate actions. The work done to become an attractive and fair environment is a medium and long term endeavour and it is not accomplished just by chance. CIDE (1995), Cotton (1995), Muijs y Reynolds (2001), Muñoz-Repiso y otros (2002)...
- Related to the previous concept, "school culture" is found relevant as well to the purpose of research. Culture is linked directly to persons in the organizations and becomes visible through people behaviour (what they say and do) in their relationships (the articulation of shared work) and in their attitudes and values (the assumptions, beliefs and prejudices) that affect informally their work procedures. Culture is considered in the research as a key aspect to explain the positive or negative living together in schools. Bolivar (2001), Choo (1998), Dixon (2002), Fullan (2002), Hopkins (2003), Prosser (2002)...
- One last aspect considers the intricate net of relationships instituted either formally or informally in schools. Different patterns of power and submission, collaboration and conflict frame the participation procedures of youngsters and adults and influence the ways in which schools fulfil their aim of educating for citizenship and democracy, modelling either democratic or autocratic ways of relating to each other. Bernstein (1990), Gerwitz y otros (1995), San Fabián (1997), Schein (1992)...

Given that the development of the construct of "living together" is still imprecise, the decision was taken to start with a study of descriptive type, whose purpose was "to observe individuals, groups, institutions, methods and materials in order to compare, classify, analyze and interpret behaviours..." (Cohen and Manion, 1990). The case study method was chosen.

The study is mainly qualitative, although some quantitative elements were used to offer an appropriate contrast. It is common to combine both quantitative and qualitative techniques to allow enough amounts of data and a contrastive analysis of them (Coller, 2000).

The study tries to provide genuine and valid pictures of three school organizations that illuminate meaningful aspects of their hidden and tacit rules and organizational behaviours. As Adelman (1984) states, "case study is an umbrella term which includes a family of research methods to explore an authentic social institution". As systemic research, a case study aims to provide a thorough and accurate description of a specific example, which allows the reader to enter the account himself/herself and to check the interpretations of the researchers through the selection of the appropriate evidence provided to build the case.

The theoretical framework ends up with a list of components of school climate and culture and presents the factors that are going to be researched.

List of ingredients of "Living together" construct		
School	Classroom	School collaboration with
1.- Rules of school behaviour 2.- Integration of people and implication in a shared task 3.- Relationships 4.- Effectiveness of teaching and learning processes 5.- School leadership and project leadership*		1.- School system 2.- School community 3.- Wider social system

Each element is subdivided in different parts. * Classroom leadership and management were excluded for practical reasons.

Research variables		
A.- Context factors	B.- Dynamic factors	C.- Outcomes
1.- School background and environment 2.- The "Project" dimension 3.- Classroom climate	1.- Initial strategies 2.- Follow up strategies	1.- Achievements related to projects 2.- Evaluation system 3.- Future prospects

The research process takes the following meaningful aspects:

First, the experience of schools, whose answer to the problems has been systematic, was put forward. The selection of schools and the informants within them was not arbitrary. They represent a small example of schools confronting violence and disaffection, sheltered by the guidance and resources of The Basque Government Programme: "Living together in Schools".

Sources of evidence come from interviews with qualified informants (project coordinators, school management teams, teachers, students and families) involved in the projects, questionnaires answered by students (262 students), document analysis (school and curriculum projects, school discipline code) and in some way, direct observation.

Secondly, especial attention has been paid to the identification of informants with the opinions put in their mouths. The transcriptions of interviews were returned to the owners to receive their agreement or to amend what was significantly wrong in their views. School reports were negotiated.

And finally, validity and reliability have been pursued thoroughly to establish strong and valid conclusions. Reliability has been assured keeping a stage by stage record of the process that could easily be replicated and establishing strict revision paths. Internal validity has been guaranteed through triangulation of different informants, moments and research tools, through the contrasted vision of researchers and the redundant collection of research materials. The sampling procedure already explained and the depth of the descriptions warrants external validity.

Research instruments for interviews, questionnaires and document analysis were derived from a list of elements and components of climate and culture constructs personal and social development and citizenship, turning them into variables for the research.

The description of each school researched follows a similar pattern, beginning with the school background, continuing with the development of different aspects of the project, the evaluation of the achievements and the planning of the future.

Students' questionnaires analysis were made clustering the items into different school and classroom categories. Statistical analysis of the whole sample was provided. The means, the standard deviations and meaningful differences were calculated at 95% confidence error. Results are given by gender, grade level (2nd and 3rd grades of compulsory secondary education, and special education needs students). The items most valued in helping to establish a positive climate and a positive living together in schools are: friendship among peers, good relationships among teachers, clear and explicit rules and consequences, egalitarian treatment to students by teachers and help available to students when needed. Curiously enough, the least valued items were those related to the attractiveness of the lessons, the motivation to learning and the participation in the classroom and school management.

CONCLUSIONS:

As a common denominator, it can be said that each school chooses a cluster of strategies, a personalised cocktail, derived from the diagnosis made at the start of the project. There is a common attitude as well which drives schools of the research to rethink their positions and values, making positive "living together" project a new way of working with students, families and the wider community.

The identification of strategies put in place by school was the main purpose of the study. They have been grouped and ordered: first those used in the three schools, then those used in two of them and lately those used just in one. Those used in the three schools are arranged following these two criteria:

- Reliability or credibility level, measured according to the extent that the information has been contrasted.
- Value given by the protagonists to the potential effect of the strategy to affect outcomes.

A thorough analysis of each strategy is made school by school. They are ordered according to the established criteria. Then a global interpretation of the strategies is made to rank them. Researchers pay particular attention to those strategies considered relevant at the beginning of the study and nevertheless not confirmed by the schools.

Strategies were classified in:

FIRST ORDER STRATEGIES

- Building positive relationships based on consideration and respect
- Implication and leadership by SMT and project coordinators

The most valued strategy is both an attitude and the understanding that positive relationships are crucial and that effort must be put by teachers towards their improvement. There is a basic agreement that work done in this respect spreads constructively to every corner of the schools and pays first-rate dividends in the wellbeing of all members of the school. There is a shared diagnosis of the problems and the possible solutions as well. Every one acts in an established way and every one is responsible for the failure or the success. Teachers are trained to favour proactive strategies instead of reactive ones.

The roles of those in leadership positions are very important. They provide resources, stimulus and training opportunities. The implication of both project coordinator and head teacher is vital to the success and the significance of the project in the community

SECOND ORDER STRATEGIES

- The creation of a climate of order, safety and productivity
- Active encouragement of students to participate in school life and the implication of families and other stakeholders
- Specific time is arranged for activities to develop personal and social skills of students

Normative framework is a priority for school, at least at the start of the project: limits are established, rules are communicated and made explicit. Sometimes students are given some say and values in which rules are based are always explained carefully.

It could be said by the testimonies of schools that a clear and shared framework and understandings brings quietness and tranquillity to every activity and helps the improvement of the general climate. This framework is put into practice coherently and consistently by teachers and it becomes the basis to confront the tensions and conflicts as they arise.

Rules and normative procedures are not static neither strict. They are interpreted with care in every situation and are revised to know if they serve the purpose for which they were created or if they have become dysfunctional. Rules do not intend to over regulate the students' behaviour. Schools try to keep the balance between the protection and security and the freedom students need to create their personal values and moral options. The school capacity to educate for living together consists, among other things, in using strategies to make students perceive that rules are fair and that they are there for the shake of prevention and not of punishment.

Teachers' implication is assumed to be of great value and has been documented thoroughly by the schools. It seems, in the three cases studied, that schools need some inward work in order to gain the implication and consistency of teachers before committing themselves to the outward work to encourage the participation of students, families and the rest of stakeholders.

The involvement of parents and the local community is an important piece in the puzzle not only for academic achievement but to enhance students' behaviour and wellbeing in the schools studied. Our attempts to gather evidence on this aspect were fraught with some difficulty and justifications were given by schools of the tenet that nowadays parents were reluctant to participate.

Although the projects are a collective school endeavour, they are really put into practice, to a great extent, in classrooms where attitudes and behaviours are modelled and strengthened as habits. Classrooms by their very nature become the true places where the positive "living together" is built and tested day by day.

One final aspect considered crucial by schools involved in the research is the specific work done to promote the development of social and emotional skills. There were a wide range of issues proposed and practiced as a pastoral care work: the initial welcoming and integration of new students, the promotion of better understanding of themselves, the participation in the decisions. Great emphasis was given as well to enhance mutual knowledge and acceptance of diversity of all kinds.

However no mention was made neither by students nor teachers about the curriculum provided by schools. A variable thought important by researchers at the beginning of the study.

(1) Campo, A., Grisaleña, J., Fernández, A. (2004): "La convivencia en los centros Secundaria. Un estudio de caso". ISEI-IVEI.

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