Socio-emotional empowering through mediation to resolve conflicts in a civic way

Sara Ibarrola-García* and Concha Iriarte

Department of Education, University of Navarra, Spain

Schools are responsible for civic education and for educating the students so they may live together. This means that they need to develop educative processes that take into account the social and affective dimension of the classroom, such as improvements in the atmosphere at school and the quality of teacher–student relationships. Practical strategies are required to carry out these procedures. Foremost among these strategies is mediation as a conflict resolution procedure in school. This also promotes a wide range of emotional, socio-cognitive, and socio-moral skills, and can be influential in the development of effective civic behaviour to improve the community. In this study we present and analyse the results of a study conducted in 13 schools in Navarre, Spain, with 50 teacher mediators, 33 peer mediators, and 23 student participants aged between 13 and 18 ($\bar{x}$=15.27 and s=1.543), all of whom are involved in mediating processes, in order to perform mediation in a systematic way with the objective of bringing about socio-moral improvement.

Keywords: civic education; conflict resolution; school mediation

Introduction

Civic education, beyond its legal dimension related to civic and political rights and duties, involves a social and psychological dimension of feelings of identity, belonging, inclusion, social engagement, and participation (Fernández, 2007; Flowers, 2007). Developing these social dimensions involves addressing how to live for the social realization of the common good, the expansion of social capital, and, ultimately, building a better society (Bisquerra, 2008; Bolívar, 2007; Dam and Volman, 2007; Delval, 2006; García-Garrido, 2008; López de Dicastillo *et al.*, 2008).

In this context, education that encourages a harmonious school life has become an interesting means of civic learning in schools, of encouraging students to develop civic behaviour and attitudes, and of constructing cooperative and supportive spaces in which quality social exchanges are possible. The current challenge of school life is not so much a matter of facing up to behavioural deficits or other problems that may arise in the process of socialization, but to address questions of individualism, lack of communication, social cooperation, and participation, which have become real contemporary phenomena. Learning to live together in the school context does not just mean tolerating the existence of another human being, but respecting and valuing him or her in an atmosphere of closeness. School life cannot be reduced to learning not to fight, not to insult, and not to criticize or do harm to others. Although this would make the class a more liveable space, without positive and reciprocal exchanges, students will not learn to live together properly.

The values required for positive social relationships and school quality are also essential in a democratic and peaceful society. Muñoz (1998) explains that tolerance, equality, solidarity,

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* Corresponding author – email: sigarcia@unav.es

freedom, respect for the environment, and peace are values that can be developed through civic education, while Naval (2006) focuses on the potential for fostering honour, piety, respect for lawfully constituted authority, gratitude, the tendency to repair harm done, truthfulness, kindness, and broad-mindedness. However, the commitment for students to incorporate these values can be frustrated if not enough attention is given to creating spaces, times, a moral atmosphere, words, modes of relationship, activities, or procedures.

At school, fostering interpersonal relationships in the light of civic education and peaceful action encourages participation, decision-making, and self-reliance in solving personal and interpersonal conflicts, as well as the development of active methodologies for participatory civic education and the necessary involvement in the whole school environment. Today it has become necessary to provide education for living together in an active way and not only as an abstract concept.

This requires very specific practical strategies. Mediation is one of these. It facilitates the introduction into students' daily lives of incremental adjustments that gradually create a positive school climate, characterized by care and cooperation. In the following section we develop this idea in more detail.

School mediation: Educational strategy for socio-moral and civic learning

In most definitions, mediation is considered to be a process in which conflicting parties overcome the difficulty themselves with the intervention of a third party, who is chosen or accepted by them as this contributes to fairness and confidentiality, and also to the mediator's effectiveness (Torrego, 2003).

The transformative model of mediation (Bush and Folger, 2005, Léderach, 2005; Farré, 2006) is based on two main pillars: empowerment and recognition. *Empowerment* affects the socio-personal development that occurs in the individual's discovery of their own skills and the consequent revaluation of the person through moral growth. *Recognition* prepares the individual to experience concern for others, especially those whose interests differ from their own. Besides contributing to the personal development of those involved, mediation is also a clear instrument of social peace (Alzate, 2007; Binaburo and Muñoz, 2007; Boqué, 2007; Cohen, 2005; De Diego Vallejo and Guillén Gestoso, 2008; Jares, 2006; Rabasa, 2005). These writers refer to a 'culture of mediation' that can contribute to a culture of peace extending to different areas of shared responsibility in building positive living environments and civic solutions to conflicts.

From its inception, the practice of school mediation was associated with a desire for world peace. The first neighbourhood justice centres appeared in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, when the Vietnam War and civil rights movement generated acute awareness of conflict. Community mediation also emerged at this time, offering citizens an alternative to settling disputes in court. Following the success of community mediation, mediation was expanded into other areas, including offering it to children and young people. The support of schools was sought and some teachers incorporated conflict resolution education in the classroom. Conflict resolution education developed programmes and partnerships that directed their materials and professional service, advice, and training to conflict resolution and mediation within a particular school.

School mediation is usually associated with interpersonal conflict resolution in which the process of communication is established by the mediator and mediated student through a set of predefined steps. However, this is a very limited view of mediation, since its effects can reach the entire school, and the benefits for those involved are intrapsychic as well as interpersonal. In a previous theoretical review (Ibarrola-García and Iriarte, 2012) we described how, to what extent, and in what specific aspects the school mediation process can promote emotional, socio-cognitive, and socio-moral development (see Table 1).

Table 1: Competence development through mediation

Emotional competence	Socio-cognitive competence	Socio-moral competence
Assertiveness	Reflective thinking	Respect and reciprocity
Emotional self-awareness	Conflict resolution knowledge	Responsibility
Emotional self-regulation	Communication techniques	Moral reasoning and
Empathy		decision-making

Although this perception of mediation is interesting from a theoretical perspective, in Spain there is not much empirical evidence that confirms the potential of mediation for developing personal skills and for improving the social climate at school. One reason for this lies in the few evaluations of school mediation experiences (Torrego, 2008). The proliferation of programmes in schools has not been accompanied by tracking, let alone by systematic assessment of quality. This lack of assessment tools means that the personal benefits of mediation – of the skills and abilities learned or the changing of attitudes and behaviour – have not been analysed.

The study presented in this paper aims to address this lack by looking into how far mediation facilitates socio-moral learning for teacher mediators, peer mediators, and mediated students.

Socio-moral development

The impact of school mediation programmes on moral development is usually associated with indicators such as verbal aggression, number of offenses, or discipline records, with a decrease of these indicators taken to suggest positive moral development. But such a view is questionable since a decrease of inappropriate behaviours does not guarantee the creation of pro-social behaviours. Although it has been shown that learning procedures for conflict resolution and mediation increase individuals' sense of belonging to a group and the ability to perceive others – fundamental aspects of moral development – not enough attention has been paid to these methods as key components for producing behavioural change.

For this reason, Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2005) studied whether training in conflict resolution had a positive impact on the development of *moral reasoning* in students, and found that significant changes occurred. Moreover, they assessed the effects of conflict resolution training on meta-cognitive skills, concluding that such training allowed transition from an egocentric perspective – focus on superficiality and biased thoughts – to a social perspective, with an increased sense of responsibility and self-regulation as well as consideration of the influence of one's actions on others.

Another aspect that improves moral learning is *respect for others*. When in conflict with another person we tend to focus on the other person's weaknesses, which leads to rejecting their positive aspects. Mediation encourages the individual to put themselves in the other person's position, understand the other's perspective, and accept that it may differ from their own, thus favouring a better understanding of the other person (Murciano and Notó, 2005). More than respect, Auberni (2007) speaks about *solidarity*. He believes that reaching agreements involves a degree of personal renunciation for the benefit of both parties. In addition, mediation favours the *assumption of one's own responsibilities* (Munné and Mac-Cragh, 2006). Many interpersonal problems result from a failure to take responsibility. In fact, people immersed in a conflict tend to blame others or avoid their own responsibilities.

Mediation also encourages a *commitment to improving relationships generally in the environment*. This led Bickmore (2001) to consider mediation – in this case between peers – as a service-learning model.

In short, school mediation gives students *active participation* (Torrego, 2003), which is a core aspect of a person's civic dimension since it provides an active role for individuals involved in a conflict. It gives them a voice, transforms nonconformity and complaints into positive actions, and offers participants an awareness of themselves as agents in their own training. It teaches them to fight for what is considered fair, to recognize, accept, and amend errors, and to avoid the position of 'looking the other way' (Boqué, 2010; García-Longoria and Ortuño Muñoz, 2010; Villaescusa, 2010). In addition, mediation can establish a bridge between students of different cultural backgrounds, to be used as a strategy for resolving potential *cultural conflicts* (Cavas, 2009) – although this aspect is less developed.

Another aspect of mediation that can be associated with moral learning is *confidentiality*. In conflict, there is a need to express feelings and thoughts and to exchange ideas in search of a solution, and mediation provides a useful and secure scenario for exchanging information (Cohen, 2005; Munné and Mac-Cragh, 2006). But mediation also makes individuals aware that such information is privileged, to be shared only with those involved. The following table summarizes some of the aspects studied in the literature on the influence of mediation over moral development (see Table 2).

Table 2: Moral aspects favoured by a mediation process

Moral aspects favoured by a mediation process	
Respect for others and reciprocity (Auberni, 2007; Boqué, 2007; Heydenberk *et al.*, 2003; Murciano and Notó, 2005; Munné and Mac-Cragh, 2006)	• Understanding diversity, identifying prejudice • Cooperative attitude
Assumption of one's own responsibility (Boqué, 2007; Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2005; Munné and Mac-Cragh, 2006; San Martín, 2003; Torrego, 2003)	• Active role in the search for compromise and reconciliation • Social responsibility for communal living and a sense of belonging
Moral reasoning and decision-making (Bickmore, 2002; Boqué, 2007)	• Transition from an egocentric perspective to a moral perspective • Moral principles combined with proper moral reasoning guide decision-making and action

Method

Objectives

The aim of this study is to analyse the perceptions of teacher mediators, peer mediators, and mediated students about the socio-moral learning experienced through the mediation process.

Participants

The teachers and peer mediators involved in the study all worked in compulsory secondary education, higher secondary education, or vocational training in public or semi-private schools in Navarre where the process of mediation had been in place for at least one year and at least one formal mediation process had taken place. Student participants had taken part in at least one full formal mediation process. The reasons given for mediations taking place in these schools covered the following types of conflict: insults and threats (47.82 per cent), lies and rumours

(26.08 per cent), disagreements (21.74 per cent), physical fights or physical assaults (30.43 per cent), and others, such as jokes, misunderstandings, or disobedience (13.04 per cent).[1]

In total, 13 schools across Navarre participated, 77 per cent of which were public schools and 23 per cent were private schools. All of the centres teach high school and 38.5 per cent of them also provide vocational education and training (VET).

The teacher-mediator group was the most extensive and accessible (n=50) as, within it, there was a small set of teachers trained in mediation. Seven of the thirteen participating schools offered a peer-mediator service and a good number participated in our study (n=33). The student participant group was the smallest (n=23). Numbers were limited for two reasons: parental permission could not be obtained for some students, and some centres decided not to call for participants.

Procedure and instruments

As there were no pre-existing questionnaires that would fulfil the study's objectives, the decision was made to generate them from scratch, following the theoretical framework on empowerment through school mediation and aided by aspects from assessed mediation initiatives (Ibarrola-García and Iriarte, 2012). Three questionnaires were developed that used a similar structure for teacher mediators, peer mediators, and mediated students, to enable information-gathering on various subjects, and to facilitate comparison of key aspects of mediation across the three groups.

The definitive design for each questionnaire eventually comprised 62 items for the teacher mediators, 63 items for the peer mediators, and 56 items for the student participants. All three followed an identical block sequence:

1.   personal information
2.   mediation training received (number of hours, content worked on, training and assessment)
3.   mediation experience (number of sessions and knowledge of mediation processes)
4.   student profile (performance, character traits)
5.   expectations and social validity (effects on positive relationships in general, usefulness attributed to mediation)
6.   perception of socio-affective learning (aspects regarding potential emotional, socio-cognitive and socio-moral learning in mediation).

In terms of reliability, in order to analyse the correlation of individual items with the total scale, we used the method of internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha statistics. The result in the teacher questionnaire was 0.965, in the peer mediator questionnaire it was 0.917, and in the mediated-student questionnaire it was 0.926. The validation data reflected the internal consistency of the structure, with Cronbach's alpha values of above 0.8.

For the purposes of this paper we are focusing on the answers relating to section 6 of the questionnaire: socio-affective learning perception. In particular we analyse the socio-moral issues raised in participants' responses to the seven statements set out below. Answers were graded on a five-point Likert scale, in which the participants assessed the degree to which they identified with the following statements (the phrases in brackets correlate with those in Figure 1, below):

1.   Mediation has made me understand my responsibility for solving my own conflicts (personal responsibility)

2.   I am more respectful and more readily accept the differences between people with whom I associate (respect)

3. I feel more involved in the day-to-day running of my school, especially in situations where I can participate (participation)
4. I believe that mediation has helped me understand what is just and what is unjust (justice)
5. I now place more importance on not speaking ill of people (reliability)
6. I now place more importance on understanding how good relationships can be established (social responsibility)
7. I now value the importance of knowing how to ask for help when necessary (asking help).

SPSS software, version 15, was used for data analysis. Various statistical techniques were used for the descriptive study of the items (averages and standard deviations on the one hand, frequencies on the other), groups were compared (student's T and ANOVA for parametric testing and Mann Whitney U), and factors were correlated (Person R).

Results

The three most valued aspects for teachers related to their own contributions to the environment in terms of enabling more positive relationships through mediation. Teacher-mediators perceive an increase in their own participation in school (item 53, $= \bar{x}3.96$) and place more importance on personal and individual everyday actions for creating a good space in which to live together (item 56, $\bar{x}= 3.87$) and on taking responsibility for solving their own conflicts (item 51, $\bar{x}= 3.76$). In short, mediation has awakened in them a greater sense of civic pride (see Table 3).

Table 3: Means and standard deviations on socio-moral aspects found among teacher-mediators

Key questionnaire items	Mean	Standard deviation
Item 53: I feel more involved in the day-to-day running of my school, especially in situations where I can participate	3.96	0.942
Item 56: I now place more importance on understanding how good relationships can be established	3.87	1.014
Item 51: Mediation has made me understand my responsibility for solving my own conflicts	3.76	1.015
Item 52: I am more respectful and more readily accept the differences between people with whom I associate	3.63	1.040
Item 57: I now value the importance of knowing how to ask for help when necessary	3.63	1.019
Item 55: I now place more importance on not speaking ill of people	3.26	1.255
Item 54: I believe that mediation has helped me understand what is just and what is unjust	3.22	1.126

For peer mediators, the most valued aspect was understanding the importance of seeking help at appropriate times (item 61, $\bar{x}$= 3.91), and preventing and avoiding the escalation of conflict. Second, they saw how individual action contributes to good relationships (item 60, $\bar{x}$= 3.82), and third, they more readily perceived the most respectful way of accepting the different views (item 56, $\bar{x}$= 3.7) (see Table 4).

Table 4: Means and standard deviations on socio-moral aspects found among peer-mediators

| Key questionnaire items	Mean	Standard deviation
Item 61: I now value the importance of knowing how to ask for help when necessary	3.91	0.879
Item 60: I now place more importance on understanding how good relationships can be established	3.82	0.882
Item 56: I am more respectful and more readily accept the differences between people with whom I associate	3.70	1.015
Item 55: Mediation has made me understand my responsibility for solving my own conflicts	3.58	0.936
Item 58: I believe that mediation has helped me understand what is just and what is unjust	3.55	1.121
Item 57: I feel more involved in the day-to-day running of my school, especially in situations where I can participate	3.52	0.870
Item 59: I now place more importance on not speaking ill of people	3.39	1.197

Finally, the mediated students mostly valued reliability and placed more importance on not speaking ill of particular people when they are not present (item 52, $\bar{x}$= 3.96) (see Table 5). Second, they considered that mediation had helped them better understand what is just and what is unjust (item 91, $\bar{x}$= 3.91). Third, they were valued as mediators and understood the importance of asking for help before the conflict became unmanageable (item 54, $\bar{x}$= 3.78).

Table 5: Means and standard deviations on socio-moral aspects found among mediated students

Key questionnaire items	Mean	Standard deviation
Item 52: I now place more importance on not speaking ill of people	3.96	0.088
Item 51: I believe that mediation has helped me understand what is just and what is unjust	3.91	1.065
Item 54: I now value the importance of knowing how to ask for help when necessary	3.78	1.043
Item 49: I am more respectful and more readily accept the differences between people with whom I associate	3.77	0.869
Item 48: Mediation has made me understand my responsibility for solving my own conflicts	3.73	1.202
Item 53: I now place more importance on understanding how good relationships can be established	3.68	0.995
Item 50: I feel more involved in the day-to-day running of my school, especially in situations where I can participate	3.32	1.129

Figure 1 shows the scores of the seven socio-moral areas of concern for all three groups (first column teacher mediator, second column peer mediator, third column mediated student), these being what they considered to be the main types of learning developed by mediation. The shaded columns indicate the three most highly rated items in each group, and show that social responsibility and asking for help were among the most highly rated statements. So both teachers and student mediators appear to agree that mediation encourages their responsibility to themselves and to others in living together. Similarly, peer mediators and mediated students appear to acknowledge the importance of asking for help before the conflict was triggered.

Figure 1: The distribution of scores for socio-moral learning items
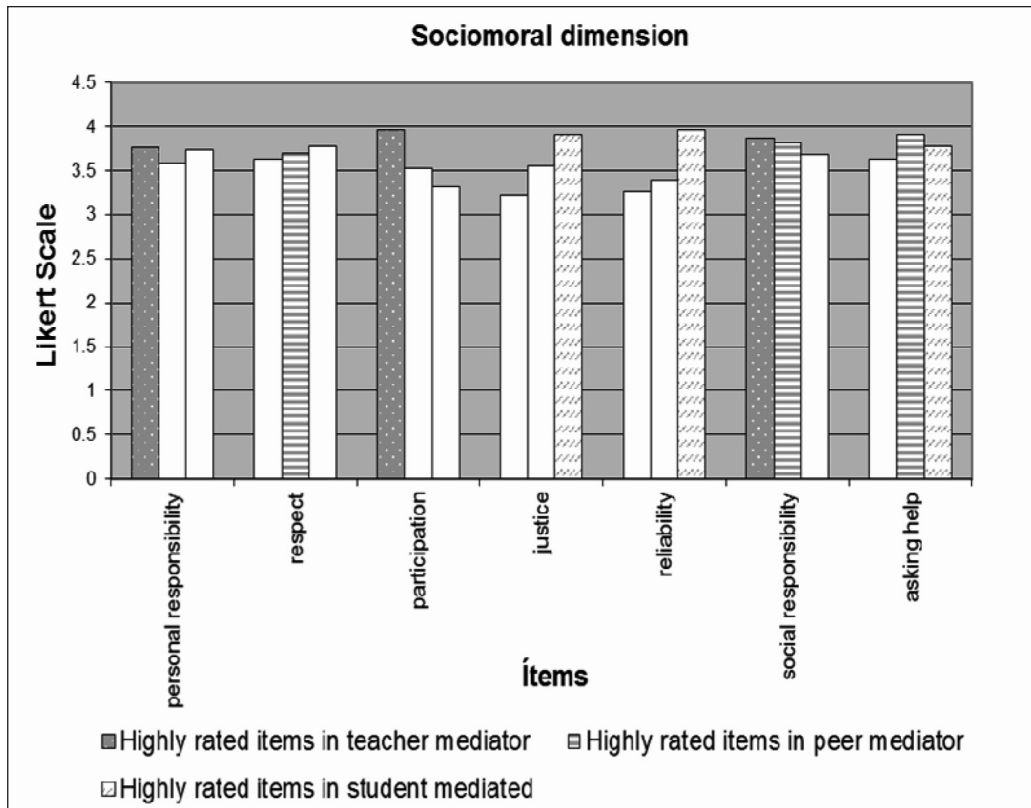
Thus, mediation includes a similar set of socio-moral and positive learning for all three groups involved. However, to check for significant differences between groups, that is, whether indicators rated in a similar way differ significantly, the following analyses were performed:

1. A variance analysis was applied through the ANOVA (F) procedure. Table 6 shows that teachers were significantly more likely to feel that the process resulted in their greater participation at school.
2. The T statistic was applied to contrast hypotheses concerning the difference between two independent means (previously, the Levene test was carried out on homogeneity or equality of variance). This confirmed that mediator teachers felt more involved in school life than the students (see Table 7). This suggests that the process of involvement in peer mediation enables teachers to identify opportunities for participation. Conversely, Table 8 shows the significant differences between the mediator teacher group and the mediated

student group. While mediator teachers highlight increased participation in the centre's daily life, mediated students indicate that mediation helps them better understand what is fair and unfair and that they start to learn not to make destructive criticisms.

Table 6: Significant differences in the socio-moral items between peer mediator, teacher mediator, and mediated student

Socio-moral item	Group	N	Mean	F	Sig.
Participation	Teacher mediator	46	3.96	3.928	0.023
	Peer mediator	33	3.52		
	Mediated student	23	3.32		

Table 7: Significant differences in the socio-moral items between teacher mediator and mediated student

Socio-moral item	Groups	N	Mean	Levene Test		T Test	
				F	Sig.	T	Sig. (bilateral)
Participation	Teacher mediator	46	3.96	0.087	0.768	2.12	0.037
	Peer mediator	33	3.52				

Table 8: Significant differences in the socio-moral items between teacher mediator and mediated student

Socio-moral item	Groups	N	Mean	Levene Test		T test	
				F	Sig	T	Sig. (bilateral)
Participation	Teacher mediator	46	3.96	2.322	0.132	2.45	0.017
	Mediated student	23	3.32				
Justice	Teacher mediator	46	3.22	0.000	0.986	–2.386	0.02
	Mediated student	23	3.91				
Confidentiality	Teacher mediator	46	3.26	4.364	0.41	–2.379	0.02
	Mediated student	23	3.96				

Discussion

The results of the survey suggest that all parties recognize value in participating in the peer mediation process.

Teacher mediators acknowledged themselves as agents whose work facilitates personal change in themselves and others. The process also increased the perception of school as a civic space. Mediation led teachers to realize that their participation is important in the creation of a positive environment for living together harmoniously. This is relevant because good communication in a school is essential for promoting a sense of community and involving students. Teacher mediators also recognized their responsibility for forestalling conflicts. Mediation offered them communication tools to take charge of the circumstances and fearlessly face up to specific conflicts, leading them to think, act, and feel better.

This process improved the mediator teachers' positive dispositions towards coexistence; mediation is not only the teacher giving information about a procedure that can be used to manage certain conflict situations but also involves the attitudinal change necessary to implement it. Indeed, research indicates that teachers who act with indifference to problematic relationships in schools do so more because of a lack of training than unawareness or unwillingness (Iriarte *et al.*, 2010). This suggests the importance of teacher training, and the teacher training given for mediation is a possible model.

Having participated in mediation, *peer mediators* recognized more than ever that it is sometimes necessary to ask for outside help. These students appreciated the need to seek advice, guidance, and orientation. This is an important type of learning for autonomy, especially in adolescence, because at this stage the desire for autonomy is more difficult to manage when it is being facilitated by an adult.

Other learning related to peer mediators' moral development involved respect for others and the greater acceptance of difference. Since voluntarily assuming the role as mediators, they had developed empathy with peers who did not belong to a more intimate group of friends. This openness to reality brings a sense of community that goes beyond individualism (Cowie and Fernández, 2006). Some research also notes progress for student mediators, specifically in the development of leadership skills and participation (Bickmore, 2002; Davidson, 2003; Terry and Gerber, 1997).

The *mediated students* also learned the importance of their own attitudes for enabling coexistence, reflecting the findings of Noaks and Noaks (2009) that they develop an internal locus of control so that, as a result of mediation, students perceive the impact of their own actions on what happens to them. This experience of learning control, personal responsibility and self-confidence is especially important in this age group because it is a resource for the development of a mature and responsible personality. Mediated students especially valued the importance of not judging others when they are not present. Mediation may help to externalize feelings, with positive reinforcement helping connections with peers. This may encourage them to reconsider negative attitudes and any unnecessary criticism of others. The mediation process implemented by the mediators is crucial. For mediated students to openly express their private emotions, feelings, and opinions, they need assurance that the personal information they provide is confidential and will not be used against them.

The students also felt that mediation develops a sense of justice. On the one hand, they experience a more social and less egocentric perspective on the conflict (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2005). On the other, they perceive the care and concern of teachers and classmates for their problems, and they see this as being fairer than a punitive approach.

The mediated students, like their peer mediators, also emphasized the importance of asking for outside help. Mediation 'allows them to visualize social and psychological support as a possible resource, helping to provide hope to those affected that there are ways of coping with potential conflict peacefully' (Ortega and Del Rey, 2003: 91). Students recognize the need for outside help

in learning how to fix a situation – which is key to the development of autonomy – without feeling guilty, insecure, or powerless.

The analysis also shows that school mediation allows for educational methods of solving conflict that encourage coexistence and that positively affect the school climate. This confirms the view that interpersonal conflict mediation prevents more serious or severe effects (Turnuklu *et al.*, 2010). Studies also show that school mediation decreases the number of sanctions (Bell and Song, 2005; Harris, 2005; Jones, 2006) and even verbal aggression (Jones and Sandford, 2004) or violence (Farrell *et al.*, 2001). A reduction in the level of all conflicts is generally noted, especially the most severe – direct physical aggression, vandalism, threats – even though 'the numerical data available do not allow an automatic judgement' (Galán *et al.*, 2008: 69). For this reason, we emphasize that the primary importance of mediation is to reduce conflict in a civic context.

Conclusions

Educational mediation is a strategy that is not only effective in eliminating conflict but which also offers significant training potential, on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, for the agents involved, as well as for the overall school climate.

This study, which has provided significant new data on the evaluation of the mediation process in a Spanish context, corroborates this statement in the sense that:

- students have discovered the usefulness of mediation and its importance in developing relationships, encouraging acceptance of and respect for individual differences, and understanding the influence each person has on the overall social climate
- mediated students were able to understand the major socio-moral and significant changes attributed to the mediation process, improve their reliability, and develop a better sense of justice and willingness to ask for help to prevent or solve problems.

Mediation encouraged the participation skills of teachers as mediators. The potential of mediation to become a civic learning procedure that can be commonly used in schools was reaffirmed.

Note

1. Percentages refer to the proportion of students that indicated the given reason. Some students indicated more than one reason.

Notes on contributors

Sara Ibarrola-García has a PhD in psychopedagogy from the University of Navarra, where she is Assistant Professor in the Department of Learning and Curriculum and teaches courses on 'Designing, developing and innovating the curriculum', the 'Spanish language didactic', and 'Language learning and attention to linguistic diversity'. Her research lies mainly in school mediation and curriculum innovation. She has published a book, *La convivencia escolar en positivo: mediación y resolución de conflictos* (with Concha Iriarte Redín, Pirámide, 2012).

Concha Iriarte Redín is Professor in the University of Navarra's School of Education and Psychology where she teaches developmental psychology, special educational needs, and personal counselling. Her research focuses on the development of emotional and social competencies. She has participated in numerous research projects and is author of diverse scientific material in books and journals, including *Programa de desarrollo emocional y social: PECEMO* (Aljibe, 2005) and *La convivencia escolar en positivo: Mediación y resolución de conflictos* (with Sara Ibarrola-García, Pirámide, 2012).

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