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**SPECIFIC STRATEGIES AND MODELS IN APPROACHING
CONFLICTS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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musata.bocos@yahoo.com**Abstract**

The phenomenon of conflict is a natural and inevitable one in human existence, including of children and young schoolchildren. In the case of our research, we have studied various possibilities for preventing and resolving conflicts that have negative effects, those that involve violence in interpersonal relationships between primary school students and those with adverse long-term consequences. The topic of the current paper is theoretically grounded from multiple knowledge perspectives: etymological, lexical, philosophical, social, educational, thus trying to render the central concept in a holistic approach: the conflict. Complementary, we highlight relevant perspectives upon the significance, dynamics, sources, and the taxonomy of the conflicts, especially for the school environment, with emphasis on those involving very young students. Mainly, our article brings to the attention of all those interested in the subject an inventory of strategies and models, in which we focus on practical proposals, useful to teachers in the management of interpersonal conflicts in case of students in the primary school. Education plays a key role in preventing conflict among students and violence, in general, both in school and the wider community level, by promoting values related to caring for others, respect for human rights, integrated into a culture of peace and nonviolence.

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1. Introduction

Conflicts and various personal, individual, or collective experiences, arising from them, lived at different degrees of intensity and manifestation, are universal elements, common to human existence in general. At a more particular level of analysis, we refer to the school environment where the students from the primary education cycle are found, more precisely to a dynamic social context, in which it is noticed that the frequency of interpersonal conflicts among students has an ascending path. At the same time, the severity and recurrence of the behaviours adopted by students, in situations of conflict with their peers, signal dysfunctions in their approach to such tense social moments. The basic scientific reason that justifies our study is reflected in the assumed and conscious intention to investigate issues related to causality, process, frequency, and dynamics specific to the type of interpersonal conflicts in young students, supplementing with a comprehensive view of the possible effects associated with conflicts of this nature. We corroborate valuable ideas from the literature, relevant statistical data, provided by international studies and organizations, as well as alternative practical variants of conflict management, to build an operational framework adapted to primary school students and easy to implement by teachers.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Etymological and lexical analyses associated to conflict

The lexeme "conflict" comes from the Latin "conflictus,-us" with direct reference to "confligere", translated like "to clash, to hit". The Romanian language borrowed the term "conflict" through its francophone correspondent "conflit" and The Illustrated Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language (Gunivas & Arc, 2007) offers for it the following list of defining words: misunderstanding, clash (between two or among more people, groups and so on), disagreement, antagonism, quarrel, (violent) discussion, dispute, fight. Larousse Dictionary (Larousse, n.d.) defines conflict in rapport to three main reference areas: the military conflict, namely the war – a fight, especially an open one, between opposing forces: „*Lutte armée, combat entre deux ou plusieurs puissances qui se disputent un droit*”; the conflict as "difference" – disagreement among ideas, principles or people: "*Violente opposition de sentiments, d'opinions, d'intérêts*" and the psychological conflict, regarded as a mental fight – the psychological state given by the opposition, mostly unconscious, among desires, needs, impulses and simultaneous, but incompatible tendencies: „*Expression des exigences internes inconciliables, telles que désirs et représentations opposés, et plus spécifiquement de forces pulsionnelles antagonistes. (Le conflit psychique peut être manifeste ou latent.)*". In the present research we have focused on the second perspective, referring mainly to the social manifestations and implications of the conflict, particularly in case of interpersonal relationships for the students in the primary school.

2.2. Relevant philosophical and psychological views in explaining the conflict

According to the statements of more philosophers, conflict represents a critical step in the evolution of the opposing contradictions and of the human being in general. Cohen (2005) stated about conflict that it is not only a normal side of life, but a necessary part. Conflicts can make us more powerful

and wiser. They can teach us better ways of solving problems, bring us closer to the people we care about, reveal new aspects of us and enlighten us about our position in world. Solving the conflicts triggers a curative function upon the human being and society in general, offering occasions for the investigation of the alternatives in a circumstance of disagreement. At the same time, it re-establishes the balance and the normality of the relationships among people. The conflict and the process of its settlement facilitate the discussions and involve the parties engaged in conflict, in contexts in which they can choose to take positive alternative decisions, in order to find a solution to their disputes, the ones which have sparked off the conflicting tensions.

2.3. Social and educational perspectives employed in conceptualization of conflict

The social character of the conflict manifests itself in the human interactions from early ages already, which led to queries, reflections, and research upon the formative impact of the conflict in the educational, formal, nonformal, informal environment. The functional and constructive effects of the conflict situations, which the ones to be educated experience in the context of early education and young schoolchildren, were investigated, and validated by specialists, theoreticians, and practitioners in the field of education. A shift of stress from the negative, dysfunctional perceptions towards the formative, constructive valences is observed. This approach is much more encouraged among the teachers, both for changing, shaping the others' views and for supporting them in remodelling the styles of the preventive and resolute approach of the conflicts from the school environment they work in.

3. Research Questions

In accordance with the pedagogical research having been carried out, the investigative approach was directed thanks to a set of research questions correlated with the problem under scrutiny:

- Which are the strategies and the intervention modalities with a preventive character, most recommended in the process of conflict management in the school environment?
- Which are the strategies and the intervention modalities with ameliorating character that should be most frequently approached in the process of conflict management in the school environment?

4. Purpose of the Study

The general goal of our research was in holding a complex inquiry upon the phenomenon of conflict in the school environment, from the perspective of causality, processuality, typology, prevention and its management. From a theoretical point of view, we pointed to:

O_{t-f.1}. Identifying some specific aspects to the phenomenology and dynamics of the conflicts in the context of the interrelationships among the students in the primary school.

O_{t-f.2}. Creating a set of praxeological guidelines for teachers by highlighting some specific strategies and models used in the conflict approach for young students.

5. Research Methods

Our study has required to apply a set of scientific methods specific to research, assuming systemic, critical and reflective approach upon the topic while exploiting sources from the bibliography in the area through complex processes: acknowledging, understanding, explanations, interpretations, generalization, making inferences and logical assumptions which lead to creating a theoretical explanatory pattern, accessible for practitioners. The theoretical arguments are supported through citing Romanian and foreign authors having expertise in the research of conflict situations or through reference to certain documents and studies having been carried out prior to this on the topics associated with our research topic. According to the specificity of each point dealt with in the theoretical research, we employ: transversal studies (we approach it chronologically, analyzing the problem from the perspective of its evolution in time), research reading (we read and analyze carefully and critically, then we write down the relevant information), exegetical reading (we approach thematically, offering explanations and interpretations around the key concepts), self-observation and experiential observation (which contribute to the deep understanding of the phenomenon in study).

6. Findings

6.1. Conflict prevention strategies and patterns in the school environment

We claim that the patterns and the strategies of prevention and solving of the conflicts among students should be outlined by reference to an actual macro perspective upon the problem of the conflicts and violence in the school environment. In this respect, we suggest as guiding elements the priority actions put forward by UNESCO in order to accomplish the Agenda 2030:

- leadership and firmer commitment from all the educational actors in order to eradicate violence in school.
- the promotion of the awareness of violence upon children and among children, of the harmful impact of the violent conflicts in school and of the benefits of the schools lacking such violent behaviours.
- creating partnerships, including the active participation of children in order to eradicate violence in school.
- increasing the capacity of teachers to avoid violent conflicts in school and to respond with appropriate measures in such cases.
- establishing some mechanisms to report conflicts and the acts of violence in school and to provide with some support service (programme).
- the improvement of the system of data about the causes, the nature, the spread, and the impact of violence and of the violent conflicts in schools and about efficient solutions against them.

Any solution to conflicts includes better communication with students. The better and more complete the communication, the more likely to create a climate of physical and mental safety and the conflicts would be easier to be solved. Some specialists in the field of the research in education (Bocoş et al., 2008; Pânişoară, 2004), claim that firstly there should be applied a series of *communicative strategies*

of prevention of the conflict which must contain: avoiding conflicts on lesson objectives, the existence of stable tasks, well-structured and accepted by the whole group, encouraging communication, avoiding win-loss situations and the use by teachers of elements belonging to activity moderation strategies.

The general strategies for conflict prevention are:

- Active listening, which, according to Pease and Pease (2007), must be done following some essential rules:
 - encouraging others to keep talking and make sure you understand what is being said to you.
 - using minimal encouragement to stimulate the other person to speak.
 - maintaining visual contact with the interlocutor throughout the communication period, especially if he also looks us in the eye to establish a connection.
 - bending towards the interlocutor, approaching him, to show him our interest.
 - avoiding the desire to change the subject before the speaker has finished what he has to say and the tendency to interrupt it.
- Assertive expression, which involves presenting the message loudly and, at the same time, respectfully, using the assertion I (we communicate something to another person about how we feel about that situation, without blaming and without imposing the solution), communication in terms of their own needs, concerns, and feelings, etc.
- Stimulating the other's self-esteem, promoted in the literature and by Stoica-Constantin and Neculau (1998), supported in the school reality by: frequent use of positive reinforcements, creating and capitalizing on the chances of success by entrusting the other, for a while, of simpler tasks and with certain chances of success, in order to revive his self-confidence, to avoid direct, brutal and humiliating expression, of negative evaluations towards an attribute or activity of the other and to compliment, the open and sincere signaling of some qualities.

6.2. Strategies of reducing conflicts in the school environment

Simultaneously with the strategy/strategies adopted for the prevention of conflicts in the school environment, there should be implemented in practice certain *communicative strategies of reducing the conflict*. University professor Pânișoară (2004) proposes two general approaches that influence these strategies, namely:

- focusing on changing attitudes.
- focusing the approach on changing behaviors.

These can be achieved by:

- the use of integrators (appealing to people with influence in the group can reduce the intensity of some conflicts).
- rotating people from one group to another, rotating group responsibilities.
- in case of intergroup conflicts, the identification of superordinate objectives (proposed by the teacher), which would determine the groups to work together.

A role of great importance in reducing the conflicts is criticism. This must be used in a positive, constructive way, which does not fuel the conflict and it must be always applied in direct relation to the

appreciative elements. Expressing constructive criticism implies clarity and specificity, having as a centre of interest the inappropriate behavior that is intended to be changed and not the student who displayed it. In this direction, we enunciate some useful suggestions in school practice, in the particular case of the use of constructive criticism:

- the name of the student who manifested the inappropriate behavior is clearly pronounced, following to highlight the mistake of behavior and not the incompetence of the student.
- the reason / reasons for which the reported behavior was inappropriate are mentioned.
- presents the variant / variants of behavior that could replace the inappropriate one, describing the appropriate actions, in simple, concrete, observable terms, easy to understand by the students from the primary classes.
- a confident and firm attitude is adopted by the teacher, but without imposing himself with nervousness, resentment, threat, pressure, or domination.

One of the strategies that works in many groups of students, to reduce interpersonal conflicts, is one of behaviorist inspiration. According to Bocoş et al. (2008), a certain behavior of students, which is considered inappropriate and can generate conflicts, can be changed by specific techniques that use mainly positive stimuli (more rewards than punishments). One of these techniques involves the following steps:

- a) Identify the behavior that needs to be changed. Be very specific about the behaviors you will reward.
- b) Decide on the reward system. For example, marking each positive act with a star. At a certain number of stars, something will be won.
- c) Introduce to the class this behavior improvement plan.
- d) After the students have understood and agreed to the procedure, apply it.

According to the vision offered by Bocoş et al. (2008) on this specific topic, another privileged strategy to reduce the level of conflict is to reduce competition by establishing practices that encourage and reward cooperation. For example, in a group of students solving a learning task, no one will ask for the teacher's help until they ask for support from the group members. This shift from competition to cooperation has two advantages: reducing conflict and increasing school performance, in terms of establishing a positive atmosphere, conducive to teaching.

For the development of cooperation between students are proposed methods: implementation of programs to guide weaker students by the best, implementation of projects by groups of students or by the whole class, the use of games in which students learn how to work together, designing learning situations through cooperation.

We emphasize that it is necessary to alternate and continuously develop strategies to reduce conflicts, shifting the emphasis from the systematic material reward of students, on creating a secure and pleasant educational environment for all learners. In the long run, the effect of any reward system decreases, and the quality of the atmosphere created contributes to the harmonization of interpersonal relationships and the decrease in the share of interpersonal conflicts. At younger ages, material reward systems need to be changed quite frequently. Gradually, teachers should introduce more and more positive stimuli of a cognitive, emotional, and social nature.

6.3. Basic strategies and models used in the conflict approach

The management of the conflicts can be regarded as a broad concept, which implies solving the conflicts and the transformation which is necessary, but also as a commitment and a long-term commitment. This implies insights and institutional procedures of solving the conflicts on long-term. In our vision, ***solving conflicts*** in our school organizations, emphasizing the social character of the conflicts, may be defined as: *a conscientious, controlled, assumed, intentional and strategic process, whose purpose is represented by the identification of alternative variants of solving a conflict, action naturally followed by the selecting, applying, reconfiguring and sensibly adjusting a state of balance at the level of the relationships among the disputant ones, as well as at the individual level (intrinsic)*. The manner one acts in a conflict is influenced by the importance of the assumed objectives and of the relationship among the persons engaged in the conflict situation.

There is a set of basic strategies that may be applied within a conflict, namely:

- *Avoidance* – it applies in situations in which the problem has a low relevance, the chances to win are reduced, the reduction of the existent tension is necessary, calming and gaining the perspective upon the problem or more information in necessary.
- *Competition* – becomes operative when a quick, decisive action is necessary, when there are vital problems for the good functionality or when a protection against people who take advantage of the uncompetitive behaviour.
- *Agreement* – finds its applicability in situations in which a party involved becomes aware of the fact that others' problems are more important than theirs, when they must obtain credit for other situations, when the stability and the harmony of the group matters and also realize that it can learn from mistakes.
- *Compromise* – comes to be accepted when the goals are not important or partial solutions of some problems are necessary, when "the enemies" have equal powers and are fond of their goals, but also when other strategies (for example, collaboration) were unsuccessful.
- *Collaboration* – is preferable when their own objective is to learn, so they aim at uniting different points of view, obtaining consent and combining opposing opinions.

Any the strategy or set of strategies applied to ameliorate, negotiate and solve the conflict situations, there are a series of specific actions necessary: the identification of the real reason, the one which generates the tensional state of stress, the comparative analysis, with great objectivity, of the exposed variants, the individual discussion for completing the causal information, the discussion at the group level, as a case study, using the reward system, organizing discussions in groups, making excuses at the group or class level, offering the necessary explanations and searching the positive, formative aspect in any tensional state.

- Teachers must be aware of the children's intentions and help them clarify their own understanding of the conflict, being necessary the distinction between a conflict which children really try to solve, or it is a simple wordplay, mutually accepted.
- The students' capacity of solving conflicts increases as their verbal competence and their capacity of taking into consideration other points of view and perspectives increases. If the

students engaged in a conflict are verbal and empathic, the teachers should leave them work alone at producing a solution accepted by all the parties involved.

- The teacher's decision to intervene should be made after the conflict between students was observed, as well as the visible problems that had provoked it. The problems about possession and nicknames generate fewer contradictory discussions about the problems linked to deeds and decisions of the game.
- The children who mutually explain their actions are more predisposed to create their own solutions. In the conflicts in which the schoolchildren resort to physical strategies and simple verbal oppositions, teachers should help them find more words to use (in a constructive way).
- Teachers should notice whether the students have played together before the conflict occurred. The interaction and the friendships that have been developed before motivate children to solve the disputes on their own.
- Teachers can reduce the frustration of a constant conflict through making the (indoor/outdoor) playgrounds accessible and offering diverse materials the students may share.
- Children often rely on adults who are frequently available to offer a solution which is considered by them right. Teachers should offer their children time to develop their own resolutions and allow them to choose negotiation, changing the activity, abandoning the problem, or creating new rules.
- Many conflicts do not imply aggression and children are on many occasions capable of solving their disputes. The teachers should offer appropriate guidance, but also allow children to handle their own conflicts and solutions (Sheehan & Wheeler, 1994).

Conflict resolution is essentially about intervening to change or facilitate the course of a conflict. In general, conflict resolution offers the opportunity to interact with the parties involved, in order to reduce the intensity and negative effects of a conflict. The resolution of conflict situations requires the application of specific models for conflict management in the school environment:

- *The Carter model.* It assumes that in all situations the teacher is positive, to guide students so that they are aware of the goals and requirements for solving, but also disciplinary rules, participation, using the appropriate range of incentives.
- *Glasser model.* It is a model that identifies with the therapy of reality, with a permanent reporting of the behavior to the specifics of the environment, to its requirements and difficulties, through analyzes and debates.
- *The pattern of behavior changes.* It is based on the system of reinforcements, being known that the reinforcement of a behavior is due to the positive or negative consequences it has. Strengthening, repeating one positive behavior, and not reinforcing the other will inevitably lead to change.
- *The model of logical consequences.* The application of this model requires that the student self-analyze and predict the consequences of deviations, with the support of the teacher and the class to which he belongs.

The Glasser Model proposes to go through a staged process, by the teacher, in direct collaboration with the student / students in the conflict, in order to modify, together, a maladaptive, dysfunctional behavior:

- The teacher's involvement in the relationship with the students, helping them, through clear and punctual actions, to solve certain problems that exceed them, thus assuming that the student is accepted as a person, but not his inappropriate behavior.
- Description of the student's current behavior, without making an immediate assessment of his person.
- Assisting the student in the decision-making process, ensuring that he makes the right choices to improve problematic behavior, by constantly reporting to the factors that cause / trigger and maintain the problem.
- Supporting the student in the activity of planning the development of amelioration actions, by making him / her responsible.
- Guiding the student to get involved in the actions he has selected.
- Supporting the learner in following the plan and the commitment assumed for the improvement of the behavior.
- Consistent application of the consequences of maladaptive behavior, without punitive attitudes.
- Development of an alternative plan, also in collaboration with the student.

The parties to the conflict are the ones who own the conflict and, therefore, they should also be responsible for resolving it. An agreement to end the conflict will be considered legitimate and much more stable if the conflicting parties have been involved in its elaboration. If, on the other hand, a resolution is imposed from the outside, without considering the concerns and needs of all parties, the chances of a lasting solution are low and the risk of a recurrence of the conflict is higher. The exclusion of individuals or groups from the conflict management process, a method often used to punish those who oppose the proposed solutions, does not give the rejected parties any reason to adopt and abide by the resolution. Thus, to benefit from lasting changes, we recommend the involvement of all actors in the conflict.

7. Conclusion

For choosing a specific strategy or model in approaching interpersonal conflicts among young students, we encourage the practitioners from the school environment to bear in mind several considerations. The parties in the conflict are the ones who *hold the conflict* and, consequently, they should be responsible for solving them, too. An agreement to end the conflict will be considered legitimate and much more stable if the conflict parties were involved in outlining it. In return, if a resolution is imposed from outside, without considering the concerns and needs of all the parties, the chances of a lasting solution are reduced, and the risk of the conflict reappearing is higher. To exclude the persons and the groups from the process of conflict management, a method which is often used to punish the ones who fight back the suggested solutions does not offer any reason to the parties rejected to adopt and to respect the resolution. Therefore, to benefit from lasting changes, we recommend the involvement of all the players in the conflict.

Solving conflicts essentially aims at the intervention in order to change and facilitate the development of a conflict. Generally, solving conflicts offers the possibility to interact with the parties engaged, having as a goal to reduce the intensity and the negative effects of a conflict. Teaching experience shows that interventions to prevent and / or reduce conflicts are more effective when students are directly involved in their planning and implementation. The school environment can become a more secure space when educators become partners in the process of managing their own conflicts. The formative value of this strategy is based on the creative contribution of students, who have the ability to formulate ideas, questions, and answers with more meaning for their own person, than if they were constantly imposed by an adult from outside (e.g., teacher). Through our paper we highlight the importance of this active-participatory style, due to which students feel that they are valuable presences in school life, that they contribute to the creation of school communities and that they are directly and responsibly involved in school disciplinary efforts.

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