

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ROMANIAN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES: AN EXAMINATION OF PRACTICES IN CLUJ-NAPOCA HIGH SCHOOLS

Christian-Radu CHEREJI
Ciprian SANDU

Christian-Radu CHEREJI

Professor, Director of Conflict Studies Center, Faculty
of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences,
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Tel.: 0040-731-348.584
E-mail: chereji@fspac.ro

Ciprian SANDU

Lecturer, College of Political, Administrative
and Communication Sciences,
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Tel.: 0040-744-327.582
E-mail: ciprian.sandu@fspac.ro

Abstract

This article delves into the nuanced landscape of conflict management within Romanian school communities, with a specific focus on administrators, teachers, students, and parents. This study conducted comprehensive research involving four high schools in Cluj-Napoca, employing a multifaceted approach incorporating focus groups and surveys. The findings of this investigation reveal a prominent trend in conflict resolution within these school communities: conflicts are primarily resolved through administrative decisions and sanctions. This predominant reliance on hierarchical authority structures to address disputes emerges as a dominant theme, while awareness and utilization of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods are notably absent.

Keywords: conflict resolution, school communities, administrators, teachers, students, parents, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), administrative decisions, sanctions.

1. Introduction

The present article investigates how conflicts occurring within school communities in Romania are dealt with and explores potential venues to improve the results of the methods currently used. We defined a school community as a network of individuals connected to a particular school. It represents the group of people who contribute to and are affected by the school's educational environment and activities.

As key components of a school community, we considered the following: (i) students, who are the primary reason for a school's existence, as learners and beneficiaries of the educational programs and services offered by the school; (ii) teachers and educators who facilitate learning and create lesson plans and provide instruction to students; (iii) administrators and school leaders who oversee the overall management of the institution, set policies, and make important decisions regarding the school's functioning; and (iv) parents, the individuals responsible for the well-being and education of the students, who play an essential role in supporting their children.

Our research was divided into three major themes, each based on a specific research question:

- a. The first theme was the existence of conflicts between the stakeholders mentioned above, the types of conflicts that occurred, and their sources. In this case, our research question was: what types of conflicts emerge within school communities in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and what are their causes? In addition to the fact that we wanted to determine the typology and sources of school conflicts, we wanted to determine how all these stakeholders perceive these situations because there is a strong link between the way we perceive a conflict and the way we intervene to solve it.
- b. The second theme of the study is conflict solving and procedures, and the research question is: What are the procedures (formal and informal) used by school communities to solve conflicts that emerge between stakeholders? This research question aims to determine the formal and informal procedures used by school stakeholders to solve or manage conflictual situations inside their schools. In this regard, we are interested in both official and informal procedures, but also in the way each group of stakeholders perceives their efficiency in dealing with conflict.
- c. The final theme of this study is third-party intervention, which is based on the following research question: Is a third-party intervention mechanism involved in solving conflicts within school communities? We wanted to find out, first, if there is such a procedure inside the school communities that we study, and second, if there is a need for that. In addition, we wanted to see how school stakeholders perceived this in terms of efficiency in solving their conflicts.

To address these three research questions, we employed a mixed methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques (content analysis, focus groups, and an online survey) in four high schools in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Our findings indicate the necessity of incorporating ADR mechanisms into existing formal procedures, which most school stakeholders perceive as ineffective in managing school conflicts. The results also

emphasize the need for school administrators to modify their management procedures by focusing on the core concepts of adaptive management, namely efficiency, and flexibility, to better meet the needs and interests of the school community in conflict resolution.

This article comprises the following sections: a literature review that establishes the theoretical foundation of our study, focusing on adaptive management/governance and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), and a theoretical discussion on the typology of school conflicts. The methodology section outlines the research methods employed to address the three research questions, detailing the application of the methods, stakeholder characteristics, and their limitations. The study's main part consists of presenting the main results, discussing the findings, and critically analyzing them. The final part of the article concludes with the main findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Adaptive management/governance

Governance refers to institutional arrangements that shape actors' decisions and behavior, including the exercise of authority within groups or organizations (Hatfield-Dodds, Nelson and Cook, 2007, p. 3). According to Ostrom (2005), institutions and institutional arrangements consist of rules and norms with formal enforceable principles backed by legal sanctions, shared values, and cultural traditions maintained by positive and negative rewards. This suggests that governance operates at multiple levels, and draws on various sources of authority. Specifically, institutions are governed by state laws, while individuals' behavior within an institution is influenced by its culture, norms, formal company policies, external laws, and broader social attitudes.

Management, on the other hand, refers to the processes of decision-making and coordination within a given institutional setting that involves identifying desired strategies and implementing these through physical activities and technologies (Burriss, Drahos and Shearing, 2005). Management is expected to observe changing environments, translate these changes into decision premises for the organization, and steer new courses (Seidl, 2007).

Adaptive management/governance is a concept that focuses on the evolution of formal and informal institutions for the management and use of shared assets that promote the satisfaction of underlying human needs and preferences given changes in understanding, objectives, and the social, economic, and environmental context and it is based on the concepts of 'efficiency' and 'adoptability' of potential institutional arrangements (Bowles, 2003; Hatfield-Dodds, Nelson and Cook, 2007; Ostrom, 2005).

Improving institutional arrangements requires developing collective action strategies that are both 'efficiency enhancing' and 'adoptable', providing net welfare gains and being politically attractive within relevant decision structures and timeframes. In the context of conflict management in schools, school administrators must find efficient ways to solve conflicts within their school communities while improving relationships among the four stakeholders. These solutions must go beyond the traditional formal sanction system and be adapted to each specific situation involving each stakeholder in the decision-making

and implementation process. Adaptive management acts as a mediator between centralized expert management and decentralized resource management systems, recognizing that different types and sources of knowledge add value to decisions. Instead of rigid, centralized management, or informal management based on tradition, we can adapt and use both systems for different problems based on their efficiency in each specific case.

The sources and typology of school conflicts regarding school community conflicts include disagreements, tensions, or disputes (that can even turn violent at times) that arise among the four key stakeholders. If we look at the parties involved, we can identify the following types of school-community conflicts:

- a. Parent–teacher conflicts: differences in opinion between parents and teachers regarding a student’s academic performance, behavior, or educational needs.
- b. Student–teacher conflicts: tensions between students and teachers over classroom rules, assignments, grading, or disciplinary actions. This type of conflict is the most common and usually constitutes the primary cause of the parent-teacher type of conflict.
- c. Teacher–administrator conflicts: disagreements between teachers and school administrators concerning policies, curriculum decisions, or professional issues.
- d. Teacher–teacher conflicts: disputes arising from competition for positions, resources, personal or professional values.
- e. Parent–administrator conflicts: differences in opinion between parents and school administrators regarding school policies, disciplinary actions, or educational practices.
- f. Student–student conflicts: conflicts between students, such as bullying, peer pressure, social cliques, or disputes over personal matters.

If we consider the issues at stake, school community conflicts might refer to the following:

- a. Community–school conflicts: disagreements between the school and the local community regarding issues such as school zoning, funding, or the use of school facilities;
- b. Cultural or value conflicts: conflicts arising from cultural differences, religious beliefs, or differing values within the school community;
- c. Budget and resource allocation conflicts: disagreements over how limited resources, such as funding, technology, or educational materials, should be distributed among different programs or departments;
- d. Curriculum and educational philosophy conflicts: disputes over the content, approach, or emphasis of the school’s curriculum and educational methods;
- e. Policy implementation conflicts: tensions arise when stakeholders disagree on the implementation of specific school policies or initiatives.

These conflicts can arise because of differing opinions, interests, priorities, or values among the individuals involved. Rahim (2001) summarizes the sources of school community conflicts in five categories: a. communication problems; b. role ambiguity; c. goal incompatibility or conflicts among the stakeholders of the school community; d. conflicts of interest or over resources; and e. differences in values.

2.2. Conflict management

In his seminal book, ‘The Conflict-Positive Organization: Stimulate Diversity and Create Unity’, Dean Tjosvold (1991) focuses on the idea of fostering positive conflict management within organizations, aiming to utilize conflicts as opportunities for growth, creativity, and increased collaboration. Tjosvold suggests that, instead of viewing conflicts as negative or disruptive, organizations can create an environment that encourages open dialogue, diverse perspectives, and constructive conflict resolution.

The same ideas are vehiculated in other publications by Louis Kriesberg (1998), Bernard Mayer (2012), Cloke and Goldsmith (2011), Stephen Robbins (1998) and Deutsch (1973). For all of them, conflict is an inherent part of life that cannot be avoided or eliminated. It serves as a necessary engine for evolution, improvement, and combating evil and unacceptable behavior at both individual and social levels. However, the way conflict is approached and managed determines whether it becomes destructive or positive. A confrontational zero-sum game approach can lead to negative and catastrophic consequences, whereas a collaborative approach that seeks inclusive and imaginative solutions can lead to positive change, improved relations, and stronger organizations and communities. Therefore, conflict is not inherently good or bad, but its nature depends on how it is handled.

Johnson and Johnson (1996) believe that conflicts are resolved constructively when they result in an outcome that satisfies all parties involved, improves the relationship between the disputing parties, and enhances the ability of the disputants to resolve future conflicts constructively. Adopting a collaborative approach to conflict resolution can offer numerous benefits to individuals, such as improved communication skills, enhanced problem-solving abilities, preserved relationships, reduced stress, and a sense of empowerment. It can also foster trust, develop leadership skills, and provide flexibility and adaptability.

2.3. Conflict management in schools

Valente, Lourenço and Németh (2020) view schools as a microcosm of society, where diverse perspectives and ways of being, thinking, and living are brought together, leading to daily conflicts. They argued that handling such situations requires learning, emphasizing the need for teachers to receive training in conflict management to effectively manage classroom conflicts and teach students to view and manage conflicts constructively.

Schools, as both communities of individuals and organizations, can benefit massively from implementing collaborative procedures to resolve conflicts that occur within their framework. As we have seen, conflicts are a natural part of the lives of individuals and organizations. However, when they occur in schools, they can be disruptive and cause problems for everyone who is part of the school community. Therefore, a better understanding of the possible venues for resolving conflicts in schools is extremely important for the schools themselves and the larger society.

Christopher Moore’s masterpiece, ‘The Mediation Process’, illustrates the venues well across several editions (see Table 1). These venues are part of the conflict resolution

continuum, a sequence of conflict resolution methods that occur naturally, starting with private decisions by the parties involved, then involving a superior authority for workable solutions (Moore’s third-party private decisions), and finally, more structured processes such as courts or law-making institutions (third-party public decisions). If all else fails, parties may resort to direct non-violent or violent actions, which Moore refers to as decisions imposed through extra-legal coercion.

Table 1: Conflict Resolution Continuum

Private decisions of the parties involved				Third-party private decisions		Third-party public decisions		Decisions imposed through extra-legal coercion	
avoidance	negotiation	conciliation	mediation	Administrative decision	Arbitration	Court decision	Legislative decision	Direct non-violent action	Violence or threat to use violence

Source: Adapted from Moore (2003)

The methods can be grouped into categories based on the amount of control the parties have over the decisions regarding the resolution of their conflict (from maximum control, as in private decisions such as avoidance or negotiation, to minimum to no control as in courts or lawmakers’ decisions) or based on a dichotomy between amiable/collaborative and adversarial/confrontational, where avoidance, negotiation, conciliation, and mediation are seen as amiable, and the rest as confrontational.

What is important for our study is the identification of the venues that are commonly used in our school communities and how effective they seem to be. Anticipating the results of our research, it appears that most conflicts within school communities in Romania tend to be addressed using two of the methods described in the continuum: avoidance and administrative decisions. Therefore, we strive to define them more granularly.

Avoidance is a strategy for resolving conflicts in which individuals or parties choose to ignore or sidestep the issue rather than address it directly. This approach involves evading conflict, hoping that it will resolve itself or that time will lessen its intensity. Although avoidance may seem to be a convenient solution in certain situations, it is important to understand its potential advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, avoidance can provide immediate relief from the stress of confronting conflict and allows individuals to distance themselves emotionally from the issue temporarily. However, this can lead to the persistence of the problem, potentially making it more significant when it resurfaces. Although avoidance can be a short-term strategy to manage immediate discomfort, it often leads to issues that remain unresolved and missed opportunities for growth and understanding. It can also be the cause of the intensification of conflict followed by violent eruptions, which can make the conflict extremely difficult to solve effectively and sustainably.

Using administrative decisions as a conflict resolution strategy involves relying on a higher authority or management to make a final decision. This approach can be useful when negotiation or other methods fail and time pressure is involved. One advantage is

that it draws upon authority and hierarchy within an organization or institution. A higher-level individual, such as a manager or administrator, is empowered to make a final decision that is considered final and binding. However, this method may not allow for the same level of creative problem-solving as direct negotiations, and parties may not fully accept the decision if they feel that their perspectives are not adequately considered.

Effective communication is key to ensuring that the decision is well understood by all parties and that they are informed of the rationale behind it. Administrative decisions are most suitable for conflicts where clear guidelines, regulations, or policies exist, and can guide the resolution process. It must be said that using administrative decisions as a conflict resolution strategy might not be suitable in situations in which parties' involvement and collaboration are important for maintaining ongoing relationships or achieving creative solutions.

We cannot finish our discussion without referring to punishment, a ubiquitous and essential tool in the arsenal of hierarchical organizations such as schools. Punishment is a disciplinary approach often used in schools to address misbehavior, maintain order, and deter students from engaging in undesirable actions. While punishment aims to correct misbehavior, it differs from conflict resolution. The latter seeks to resolve issues, restore relationships, and prevent future conflicts. In contrast, punishment focuses on imposing consequences for rule violations, with the main objective being to deter disruptive behavior. Punishment is often authoritative and one-sided, with the school administration or educators making decisions on the consequences.

While punishment can maintain order, it should be combined with effective conflict-resolution strategies. Conflict resolution helps community members understand the causes of conflicts, take responsibility for their actions, and learn how to resolve disputes. By integrating both approaches, schools can create a balanced environment that addresses immediate behavioral concerns and promotes conflict-resolution skills and positive relationships.

3. Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, our research was divided into three major themes, each based on a specific research question: (1) the existence of conflicts between the four stakeholders and the types of conflicts that occurred and their sources; (2) conflict solving and procedures; and (3) third-party intervention. Each theme was based on a specific research question, as follows:

1. What types of conflicts emerge within school communities in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and what are their causes? In addition to the fact that we wanted to determine the typology and sources of school conflicts, we wanted to determine how all these stakeholders perceive these situations because there is a strong link between the way we perceive a conflict and the way we intervene to solve it.
2. What are the procedures (formal and informal) used by school communities to solve conflicts that emerge between stakeholders? This study examined the formal and

informal conflict resolution methods employed by school stakeholders. We are interested in both official and informal procedures, as well as the efficacy of these methods, as perceived by each stakeholder group.

3. Is a third-party intervention mechanism involved in solving conflicts within school communities? With this question, we wanted to find out, first, if there is such a procedure inside the school communities that we study, and second, if there is a need for that. In addition, we wanted to see how school stakeholders perceived this in terms of efficiency in solving their conflicts.

To respond to these three research questions, we used a mixed methods approach, which included qualitative and quantitative methods (content analysis, focus groups, and survey).

Our study involved four school communities from the city of Cluj-Napoca, those formed around the ‘Nicolae Bălcescu’, ‘Lucian Blaga’, ‘Onisifor Ghibu’ and ‘Eugen Pora’ High Schools. They are all public schools that are funded entirely by the government. Owing to the centralized nature of the Romanian education system, there are minimal differences between schools of the same level in terms of curriculum, funding, human resource policies, hiring practices, administrative structures, and regulations. Therefore, any variations are primarily influenced by the quality of human resources rather than structural or geographical factors. As a result, our sample of schools is still relevant to this study, and the findings can be generalized to the entire country. Any differences observed are attributed to the individual skills of community members in implementing conflict-resolution procedures rather than differences in institutionalization or regulations.

We used a qualitative approach to our research, consisting of two research methods: content analysis and focus groups.

Content analysis is a research technique used to identify specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data. Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of words, themes, or concepts (Columbia University, n.d.). In this study, we examined the conflict management procedures of four high schools by searching their websites. The results of our analysis are presented in the results section.

Focus groups provide a means of gaining insight into people’s thoughts and experiences. They allow us to understand not only what people think but also how and why they think that way. In a focus group, participants can contradict, support, or complete each other’s opinions, making it an effective method for group discussion.

At this stage of our research, we left out the parents because we wanted to focus, for the moment, only on the conflicts between administrators, teachers, and students, restricting our study only to the physical perimeter of the schools. Also, although a very important part of the school communities, parents are somehow ‘outsiders’ (Romanian regulations don’t even allow the parents to enter freely the school space—facilities and courtyard—without proper and prior permission from the administration or by being summoned by it) and we wanted to concentrate on what methods of conflict resolution are used inside

the schools and how aware were administrators, teachers and students of possible alternatives to what is currently in use.

For our research, we had nine focus groups, three for each high school (Nicolae Bălcescu, Lucian Blaga, Onisifor Ghibu), with the following composition:

- a. Administrators: In each high school, we met with the principal, the vice-principal, the coordinator of the Students Council, the coordinator for the formal and extra-curricular educational activities, the school psychologist, and three members of the Professorial Council.
- b. Professors: There were between 8 and 40 participants, all professors without any administrative responsibilities.
- c. Students: In each case, we met with 12 students who were part of the Students' Council and were also the representatives of their classes.

For every meeting, we divided the discussion into three major themes with their related questions: (1) existence of conflict; (2) conflict solving and procedures; and (3) third-party intervention.

Beyond the content analysis and focus groups, we also conducted an online survey dedicated only to students, a survey based on a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 12 questions, using a Likert scale to measure responses. The questionnaire was answered by 112 students from all four high schools. The survey measured the existence of a formal or administrative method of solving conflicts in schools and whether it is efficient, if the students have ever been informed about alternative methods of solving conflicts, and, if so, we questioned their utility and efficiency. The two alternative methods mentioned in the survey were mediation and peer mediation, and, in the end, we measured the need for such alternative methods.

As in the case of the focus group, we organized the questions into three major themes:

1. Existence and efficiency of the formal/administrative method of solving conflicts in schools;
2. Knowledge of the use and efficiency of alternative methods for solving conflicts in schools; and
3. The need for alternative methods to solving conflicts in schools

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Content analysis – institutions and procedures

Romanian schools mainly use administrative decisions to deal with conflicts if we are to read their official Internal and Student Regulations. We can illustrate this by looking at two schools from the city of Cluj-Napoca: 'Lucian Blaga' Theoretical High School and 'Nicolae Bălcescu' Theoretical High School. They have multiple regulations open to the public. While analyzing them, it is clear that there is no alternative conflict resolution method for administrative decisions. In the case of 'Nicolae Bălcescu' Theoretical High School, there are few mentions of the management of conflicts, beginning with some of

the attributions of the teacher on duty:

‘The teacher on duty is a temporary member of the planning committee school service and has the following responsibilities: the teacher who finishes the service, together with the one who starts the service, ensures student safety during breaks in the sector, checks the order and discipline during breaks, and takes measures to mitigate conflicts in school and inform school management’.

The last one may seem like there can be some methods of conflict de-escalation, but there is no mention of that, so it can only be assumed.

There is also a Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence, Corruption, and Discrimination in the School Environment and the Promotion of Interculturality, but we could not find a list of its responsibilities in the regulations.

In cases of conflict between students, bullying, absenteeism, use of drugs, alcohol, etc., the most commonly used method is punishment. The students from the ‘Nicolae Bălcescu’ Theoretical High School, who commit deeds that violate the legal provisions in force, including school regulations, will be sanctioned according to their severity. The sanctions that can be gradually applied to students are as follows:

- a. individual observation;
- b. written reprimand;
- c. temporary or permanent withdrawal of merit scholarship, social scholarship, or professional scholarship;
- d. disciplinary transfer to a parallel class in the same educational unit;
- e. notice of expulsion; and
- f. expulsion.

In most cases, sanctions can be doubled by decreasing the behavior grade. The sanctions can be contested within five working days, except in cases in which the student is expelled from all schools without the right to re-register for a while.

‘Lucian Blaga’ Theoretical High School also has a Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence, Corruption, and Discrimination in the School Environment and the Promotion of Interculturality. The main responsibilities for preventing and combating discrimination and promoting interculturality are as follows:

- a. to collaborate with the local public administration authorities, and with the representatives of the police to increase security in the Theoretical High School ‘Lucian Blaga’ in Cluj-Napoca.
- b. to elaborate reports regarding the safety of preschoolers/students from the Theoretical High School ‘Lucian Blaga’ from Cluj-Napoca;
- c. to propose to the management of the Theoretical High School ‘Lucian Blaga’ from Cluj-Napoca specific measures, results after the analysis of the risk factors and of the specific situation, which will have as a consequence increasing the safety of preschoolers/students and staff in the unit and prevention of juvenile delinquency on the premises and in the areas adjacent to the high school.

- d. to promote the principles of an inclusive school. Prevention and elimination of the phenomenon of school segregation, which is a serious form of discrimination, is imperative for the implementation of the principles of an inclusive school.
- e. to prevent and mediate conflicts arising as a result of the application of measures aimed at observance of the principles of an inclusive school, even though mediation only appears once in these regulations, there may be talking inside the school about some other methods in solving conflict, other than the administrative one.

At 'Lucian Blaga' Theoretical High School we find the same sanctions. The sanctions applied to students are as follows:

- a. individual observation;
- b. written reprimand handed to the legal guardian or the person (over 18 years old) under signature; the sanction is recorded in the report of the class council presented to the teaching council at the end of the semester or school year; the document number is entered in the catalog; it can be accompanied by a decrease in the grade for behavior;
- c. temporary or permanent withdrawal of the merit scholarship, of the social scholarship: it is followed by a decrease in the grade for behavior;
- d. disciplinary transfer to a parallel class is followed by a decrease in grade for behavior;
- e. notice of expulsion; and
- f. expulsion.

Some other sanctions that are related to conflict and that are in more detail are the trivial language towards the school staff is sanctioned according to the decision of the class council, respectively the Teachers' Council of the school. Aggression is sanctioned by lowering the grade for behavior by up to 4 points, depending on the gravity of the deed. Students responsible for bullying should work for the benefit of the community by cleaning their classrooms and the schoolyard.

All of the above sanctions are meant to discourage deviant behavior; however, as Shahmohammadi (2014) noted, all of them provoke negative feelings and, later, will generate new negative behaviors because they are applied without taking into account the needs, and personal conflicts, problems, and students' expectations.

Because the students in our focus group are a part of the Students' Council in their schools and Students' Advocate appears frequently in this paper, these two and their attributions will be defined next.

4.1.1. The Students' Council

The main purpose of a Students' Council is to provide students with a platform to express their opinions and implement their ideas. The establishment of a students' board was a requirement when Romania joined the European Union. Students require a structure in which they can charge and organize themselves. The responsibilities of the Students' Council include representing and defending student interests and rights, facilitating communication between students and teachers, discussing students' proposals and planning future projects, motivating students to participate in extracurricular activities, identifying

and addressing problems faced by students, improving the disciplinary situation in the school, ensuring compliance with school regulations, and organizing community actions, such as fundraising and environmental initiatives.

4.1.2. The Students' Advocate

The primary goal of this department is to protect students' rights and mediate student problems. It operates independently and is accountable only to the Students' School Council plenary and/or Board of Directors. The department's objectives include upholding human and student rights, respecting diversity from ethnic, religious, cultural, and gender perspectives, ensuring equal opportunities for all students, promoting cooperation and support between students, and fostering a stable cooperation system with the family and community.

This department is one that, by law, should be responsible for mediating conflicts, although not many students know about it, and it is not used as much as we are about to see from our focus group discussions.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the regulations and the Student Council and Students Advocate responsibilities:

- a. no regulation implies mediation beforehand of the sanctions, so there is no trying to have a discussion;
- b. all conflicts are taken as facts, and one or both parties are sanctioned accordingly; and
- c. the Student Council and Students Advocate are trying to implicate themselves more in the student's life so that they can help minimize violence and maximize discussion before any other action is taken.

4.2. Focus groups

4.2.1. Existence of conflict

The results of our focus groups on this topic are not uniform and the reason can be, as mentioned in the introductory section, the differences between the managerial and individual skills of each individual who took part in this study, the social desirability aspect, or the lack of information about these types of situations.

a. Administrators

After the introduction of all the participants, we asked them a general question: 'How do you see conflicts, and what conflicts appear in your daily activities at school?' In two of the cases, the administrators rushed to tell us that in their schools there is no conflict or small isolated incidents, at most, and that everything is done in a very professional way:

'There is no conflict in our school because everyone fulfills their duties and responsibilities, and communication between us is great. We have very good students who want to study and do not have trouble.'

'There is no conflict in our school because the teachers and administrators act by clear rules, so everyone knows what his colleague or superior wants to do.'

There are also no conflicts with the students; they quarrel sometimes, as all children do, but we did not have serious conflicts between them. We try to listen to them, and we also have a permanent link with the parents via our WhatsApp group.'

In the third case, however, the situation turned 180 degrees; the principal and the rest of the participants admitted that the situation was bad and that they needed all the help to educate everyone about how conflicts can be solved efficiently.

'Thank you for taking this initiative - the situation is bad, there are many conflicts at each level, and we, as managers, instead of concentrating on our organizational responsibilities, have our schedules full of this kind of situation. We need someone to teach us about conflict management, and we are willing to do anything that is needed for that.'

b. Teachers

In the case of teachers talking about the types of conflicts occurring in their schools, all of the participants admitted that there are conflicts between themselves, between them and the administration, between them and their students, and between students, and the phenomenon is not as isolated as the administrators mentioned in their focus groups.

'Yes, there are conflicts, of course. Some of our colleagues are favored by the management, there are differences between generations of teachers, there is a lack of resources with some favoring obtaining what they want, and the rest are left to manage on their own. We have students who talk bad to us, come to the class, ignore us, bully, yes, we have a lot.'

c. Students

After the introduction of all the participants, we asked them a general question 'How do you see conflicts, and what conflicts appear in your daily activities at school?'. They immediately told us that there are many conflicting situations between themselves and between themselves and their professors and that the atmosphere during classes is very tense because of them:

'I don't think you have the time to listen to us about all that is happening here. Every day, it seems it gets worse, we fight a lot, and some colleagues talk badly to the professors; in turn, they give us low grades for nothing, and the principal is taking sides with the professors and completely ignores us. The situation is so bad that we don't even have the right to go outside the courtyard because the guardian has strict responsibilities to control us.'

Another student from a different high school told us about the existence of the same problems in her classroom:

'Oh, we can tell you stories (everyone laughs)... we have bullying, every day, we have teachers who don't respect us and we talk bad in front of them, and now we have a situation with the grades, we were told that the grades we receive for

the BAC simulation will not be mentioned in our semestrial grades but one of our professors didn't keep his word and now some of us fail to pass the class, no one is communicating with us, it's like we don't even exist unless it is something that generates good publicity for the school. Like extracurricular activities, everyone asks for our opinion.'

The same person who gave us the last quote immediately started telling us about a recent conflict that her class witnessed between one of their colleagues and one of their professors, and that they were unanimously disappointed with how their colleague reacted, saying that they did not get the chance to share their opinions as members of the Students' Council, which is a daily problem for them—the lack of voice that is given to this organism in numerous conflicts.

'Why do we even have this Council? Just to look good and respect, in theory, the student's opinion? We wanted to bring a certain situation in front of the Teachers' Council about a shameful situation between a colleague and a professor and to talk about what needed to be done (the punishment) and all it was in vain, no one heard us. It is the same with the Students' Advocate, he has a responsibility but only in theory, and no one is asking him to participate in any decision made about the punishment of a student.'

During a conversation with one of the groups, they mentioned a conflict involving a high school student who had allegedly consumed alcohol before class. The student's behavior grade decreased by four points, and all students were prohibited from entering school grounds during school hours. We inquired about their involvement in the situation and whether they were consulted. The group agreed that they should have been consulted and offered their assistance, but their opinions were not requested, not even by the Students' Advocate. They believed that the punishment was unfair, as all students were punished for one person's mistake, and the administration should have consulted the Students' Council and the Students' Advocate for the case and punishment.

All three groups agreed that bullying is the most common form of conflict between their colleagues and that there are some cases when things get physical, mostly when it comes to doing certain activities altogether, like projects; some of them would refuse, and sometimes raise conflicts, and their concern is the fact that they do not have the skills to manage (themselves or their professors) this type of situation:

'Bullying? Every day, not even every day, every break. There are 3–4 in each class that are doing this, the professors know them, and the principal also but they intervene only in the worst-case scenario if the physical abuse is so bad that the beaten one needs medical assistance. The truth is that no one knows how to handle them. I'm a girl, what can I do to stop them? The administration has the means to manage them, but they intervene too late and with the same punishment, decreasing their behavioral grade or asking for the parents to come to school, which is not efficient.'

4.2.2. *Conflict-solving and procedures*

The second proposed topic for the participants was the formal procedure for solving conflicts in each high school. As in the case of the first topic, we still have differences between the three groups regarding the formal procedure, even if, as we presented earlier, there are clear regulations regarding it.

a. Administrators

The management of each high school informed us about their responsibilities in designing procedures for managing conflicts within their organization. The majority of them are the same as those at the national level, but each high school can have its own rules and procedures, the only condition being that they will not contradict national laws.

‘As I told you, luckily, we don’t have conflicts here, but there is the Internal Code of Conduct that is posted on our website and everyone can consult it. There are a couple of instances here. First, each professor is responsible for his class so he is the one who must manage the conflict if we speak about a conflict with a student. If things are very serious or there is a conflict between the teachers, the situation is brought to me and, if it is something minor or I have all the information about it, I make a decision based on the gravity, or, I call for the Teachers’ Council where we decide.’

The manager of another high school also mentioned the procedure at her institution:

‘In our case, we encourage everyone to be open to this situation. The conflict is brought in front of us and the principal and the Teachers’ Council have the final word. In most of the cases, we have a punishment according to our Code of Conduct.’

According to our participants, the principal is informed about a conflict and makes the final decision either directly or through the Teachers Council. However, none of the administrators mentioned the internal Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence, Corruption, and Discrimination or the Antibullying Commission, which should be part of the formal conflict management procedures. The Students’ Council and Students’ Advocate are mentioned only as consultants without any decision-making power.

‘Well, yes, they exist and function and we call for their opinion mostly for the extracurricular activities. We didn’t need the Students’ Advocate so much because we didn’t have conflicts, he was there to help his colleague ‘defend’ himself for the wrong he did, and, as I told you, we make a decision based on the deed.’

b. Teachers

The participants from this group confirmed what the management had already told us, and the decision was made by the principal or inside the Teachers’ Council, based on the gravity of the situation and the internal rules of the school.

c. Students

The procedure, explained by the students, looks like this: the conflict is first brought to the attention of the head teacher, the Students' Advocate should be at this time present and see what he can do to defend the students' rights and if he can help in other ways. If the conflict persists, or if the situation is of immediate importance, the conflict is brought up to the principal, where it can go in two directions: the principal writes up a report or calls the Teachers' Council to decide what should be done.

The majority of our focus group participants believed that the Students' Advocate should compile a report that includes the student's perspective, their rights, and any violations they have experienced. This report should be presented to the principal, and if there is a Teachers' Council, the Students' Advocate should participate and present the case to all the teachers. Many teachers do not seem to take student concerns seriously, leading to a lack of trust. Students also feel that they are not informed about conflicts and are only sought after when their help is beneficial to the school.

4.2.3. *Third-party involvement*

Another important aspect that we were interested in was the involvement of or need for third-party intervention in their conflicts. We started with a question regarding possible help from the Parents' Council and the school psychologist, or if the three groups ever requested help from them. Based on all three focus groups, we understood that sometimes the parents do interfere in conflicts, but the Parents' Council is rather passive when it comes to conflict resolution.

a. Administrators

First, administrators seek input from parents on financial matters, extracurricular events, and preparation for the final exams. Second, they view the Parents' Council as a source of information rather than as a partner in day-to-day management, including conflict resolution. Teachers primarily focus on academic responsibilities rather than on management. School psychologists are valued for their support but are not seen as mediators or conflict managers.

b. Teachers

Most teachers consider that parents are important in the management of conflicts, but they find them heavily biased in favor of their children and, therefore, are not well placed to play the role of a third party who is supposed to be neutral and impartial. They expressed interest in having external help, such as professional mediators or facilitators, but confessed that they did not know much about these procedures and how effective they would be. Teachers told us that they were interested in learning more about ADR methods and how they could become more prepared to deal effectively with conflicts in their schools.

c. Students

When we asked the students if they would like the parents to be more active, they did not consider it necessary, but they did consider it necessary that the head teacher get

involved more in the conflicts, and if they think it is right, they can call upon the Parents Council to step in. They perceive the head teacher as the manager of their class and one of the first teachers responsible for guiding them and solving their conflicts. Unfortunately, most students consider the head teacher passive, and, more importantly, they do not trust him when a colleague must be defended in front of the principal.

The students had a mixed reaction to the school psychologist. While they recognized his role in resolving conflicts and wanted to have a close relationship with him, they were also disappointed by his lack of involvement in solving or mediating conflicts. Some students and their colleagues face family issues that affect their school performance, and they believe that psychologists can help them overcome these situations. They consider him an ally to mediate conflicts caused by teachers who neglect students' problems. However, the students were disappointed that the psychologist was not more proactive in dealing with conflicting situations and was reluctant to intervene in administrative decisions.

Lastly, we asked the students what they would think about bringing a school mediator, a trained person who is in contact with everybody, and an impartial and neutral person who helps solve the school conflicts; this idea was received with great interest; they would very much like the presence of a mediator if that person is open to everybody, especially students, and that can even repair the student-teacher relationship because this is a very important message that the students shared with us, as long as the student-teacher relationship is a good one, conflicts will lower in intensity and impact.

4.3. The Survey*

As in the case of the focus group, we organized the questions into three major themes:

- a. the existence and efficiency of the formal/administrative method for solving conflicts in schools;
- b. knowledge of the use and efficiency of alternative methods for solving conflicts in schools; and
- c. the need for alternative methods to solving conflicts in schools.

4.3.1. Existence and efficiency of the formal/administrative method of solving conflicts in schools

First, we wanted to know whether the students knew about the formal procedures of conflict resolution used in their high school and what they felt about their efficiency.

The first question in the survey referred to the existence of such a procedure. The results are not surprising, as there is no significant extreme, but that is not something that we expected since a quarter of our respondents do not see formal procedures as an actual method of solving conflicts, with 27.7% responding that there is no formal procedure for solving conflicts in their school. Almost the same percentage (24.1%) were in the neutral

* The survey was designed and managed by MA student Dora Gabrian under the supervision of the authors, and it was part of her dissertation. She kindly allowed us to use it in this article.

zone (neither agreeing nor disagreeing), a result that may be due to the lack of communication between the administrators and students regarding these procedures or the student's lack of interest in them. On the other hand, almost half of the respondents knew about the existence of a formal procedure for solving conflicts, with 19.6% agreeing and 28.6% strongly agreeing.

These results depict more than two possible ideas: the lack of information that the students have when it comes to schools' regulations (both because of the way the school communicates them via the website of each school and the lack of interest of the students regarding them) or the fact that, as noted previously, students do not see these administrative methods as having an impact on solving the conflict.

The second question was related to the efficiency and utility of formal procedures. In this case, we can see a greater difference between the responses that solidify our previous findings from the focus group regarding formal methods not being efficient. The majority (63.4%) disagreed or completely disagreed with the efficiency and utility of the formal procedures, 11.5% were neutral to this situation (neither agreeing nor disagreeing), and 25.1% agreed and strongly agreed, meaning that some students appreciated the formal method or that they were not aware of any alternative methods, so they see the formal one as useful and efficient because it is the only one available.

4.3.2. Knowledge of the use and efficiency of alternative methods for solving conflicts in schools

After asking questions about the existence, usefulness, and efficiency of the formal method, we moved on to determine if the students had been exposed to alternative methods of conflict resolution, in general, and to mediation and peer mediation, in particular.

Regarding the existence of an alternative method to the administrative one, 64.3% of the students said they disagreed or strongly disagreed, and no members of the school presented them with any alternative methods. We also had 17% neutral responders, but 18.9% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had been exposed to such methods. As can be seen, 61 of the 112 students never met with alternative methods of solving conflicts.

Going further, we took two examples of alternative methods to solve conflicts that were used in schools in other countries and obtained significant results. We started by asking if the students knew about the existence of mediation while giving them a short definition of this method. With 59% of students not being exposed to this method, it is very clear that mediation is not a subject much discussed in schools. Neutral responders accounted for 17% while 24,1% of the students agreed or completely agreed.

As some students were exposed to mediation, we expected that we would have very similar percentages regarding the use of mediation in their schools. Here, it is interesting to note the high percentage of neutral answers; there are many cases where respondents are not sure about their answers, so they use neutrality as a safe zone for answering. The percentage of neutral answers was 28%; students likely heard about mediation in courses such as Civics or History, but they did not know if it was being used in school as a method. Students who said they agree with mediation being currently used in schools are 20.5%,

which can be from the heads of each class or members of the Students' Council who are often put in the situation to conciliate other colleagues.

The third question related to mediation in schools is about its efficiency: If mediation is used, did it indeed work efficiently? Here, we have a large percentage when it comes to disagreeing and strongly disagreeing (54.5%). This could be partly because even people who were not exposed to mediation in school answered, which may have contributed to the high percentage. We have 24.1% neutral answers, meaning that either the mediation may have worked at the time but was not efficient in the long run, or they did not feel like it worked but did not feel like it was a total failure. Although there was a high percentage of extreme disagreement, 21.4% of the students felt that the mediation method was efficient and helpful in solving their conflicts.

The second example of an alternative method that can be used to solve conflicts in schools is peer mediation. We wanted to see if this is a method that the students know of if it is used in schools, and if so, if it is efficient. As for the questions before, we gave a short definition of peer mediation, in general, so that the students could understand what it entails, and we asked if this is a method that they have been exposed to in the school environment.

It is clear to us that peer mediation is even less known than mediation, and that is shown in our results: 74.1% of students have never been exposed to this method, so it is not discussed in schools. We had 14 neutral respondents, a percentage of 12.5%. We can see from the neutral answers that some students are unsure if they have been or have not been exposed to such methods. Only 13.4% of our respondents knew something about it; this knowledge could come from the individual interests of the students or perhaps some students practicing peer mediation without knowing the concept.

We asked the question if peer mediation is used in high schools today. From the answers that we got to the previous question, it comes as no surprise that peer mediation is not used in schools today; the students who disagree and completely disagree represent 76.8% of all. Here, we have a small growth in neutral respondents; 17% of students do not know if these methods are in use or maybe they are superficial. Only seven students out of 112 felt that the peer mediation method was being used in their school or classroom, marking up 6.3%.

4.3.3. The need for alternative methods to solving conflicts in schools

Since we saw the existence of a formal method of solving conflicts in school, we saw that if the students knew about alternative methods to solve conflicts in schools, where the results showed a lack of these methods, we wanted to see if there was a need and a wish for these alternative methods to be used in the future. From the representatives of the Students Council, we noticed a great need to learn how to solve their conflicts, so we wanted to see the general opinion of all students regarding a possible peer mediation program implementation and whether it would bring efficiency in solving future conflicts.

The results show the benefit of implementing such a method in Romanian high schools, with 81.2% (22.3% agree, 58.9% completely agree) of the students agreeing that this method would make the process of resolving conflicts in school more efficient. The neutral responses were 12.5% and 6.3% disagreed.

5. General conclusions

In Romanian high schools, the most used method for solving conflicts is administrative decisions, which often take the form of sanctions. In this context, we underline the importance of the Students' Council and Students' Advocates in helping students understand and defend their rights. These two organisms may be helpful in the implementation of alternative dispute resolution methods, especially peer mediation, in Romanian high schools.

Do students have information about constructive conflict resolution? The short answer was mostly no. Some of them know there are other ways of solving conflicts than the formal ones, but they do not know what exactly they imply; some may know from home, some may know as a result of individual study, and a very small number have had these methods explained to them in school.

Other conclusions drawn were the effects of the current rigid system of conflict resolution in schools and the possible benefits of implementing alternative methods for conflict resolution. In our research, we could see the negative effects of the rigid sanctions system—the students who refuse most of the time to go to their teachers for help fear that they will be sanctioned without the possibility of having a constructive discussion. If they get a sanction, they usually do not understand why they got it, but most importantly, they would not reflect upon their actions and most probably would repeat them, risking further penalties.

Addressing conflicts in schools openly and using alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods are crucial for several reasons.

1. **Maintaining a positive learning environment:** Conflicts can disrupt the learning environment in schools, affecting not only the directly involved students but also their peers and teachers. Open communication and ADR help to restore a harmonious atmosphere, allowing everyone to focus on education.
2. **Teaching conflict resolution skills:** Schools can model healthy conflict resolution for students by openly discussing conflicts and using ADR methods. It teaches students essential life skills, including effective communication, empathy, and compromise, which they can use in various situations throughout their lives.
3. **Preventing escalation:** Ignoring conflicts or allowing them to fester can lead to more significant issues. Open dialogue and ADR methods allow conflicts to be addressed early, reducing the likelihood of escalation to more serious problems or even violence.
4. **Promoting inclusivity and equity:** Open discussions about conflicts can uncover underlying issues related to discrimination, bullying, or inequity. Addressing these issues through ADR methods can lead to fairer and more inclusive school environments.
5. **Building trust and relationships:** Encouraging open communication and ADR methods foster trust among students, teachers, and parents. Trust is essential for effective learning and collaboration within school communities.
6. **Promoting restorative justice:** ADR methods often align with the principles of restorative justice, which focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships, rather than

- punitive measures. This approach can be particularly beneficial in school settings because it encourages empathy and personal growth.
7. Supporting individual growth: Openly addressing conflicts and using ADR methods can help individuals involved in conflicts learn from their experiences and develop skills for better future interactions. This could lead to personal growth and development.
 8. Self-governance is possible and often desirable in contrast to the common argument that externally imposed management is the best or only sustainable form of governance. By encouraging a more diverse perspective on conflict management decision-making processes and involving all the school community stakeholders in this action, school administrators will satisfy multiple values and interests that will lead to a more efficient way of conflict management.
 9. Conflicts are not fixed or straightforward, and cannot be easily settled. Although school regulations provide quick and efficient solutions, the best way to resolve conflicts is through collaboration and involving all parties in the decision-making process. This approach ensures a win-win situation for everyone involved. Additionally, the ADR method recognizes that each conflict is unique and requires a tailored approach rather than using a one-size-fits-all solution for all types of conflicts.
 10. Our study can set the basis for a peer-mediation program in Romania with the same guiding principles as those in Europe and the USA. In this study, we attempted to cover a blank spot in the European peer-mediation literature and align our school community policies with those already developed in other countries. Simultaneously, together with the pilot project already run by the authors of this article, our study can become an example of good practices regarding efficient conflict management mechanisms in schools.

In conclusion, there should be more about conflict resolution in Romanian schools than about administrative decisions and sanctions. Addressing conflicts in schools openly and using alternative dispute-resolution methods are essential for creating a safe, inclusive, and productive learning environment. It not only resolves immediate issues but also equips students with valuable life skills and contributes to the overall well-being of the school community.

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