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Learning to live together: a challenge for schools located in contexts of social vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Currently, there are many educational centres that demonstrate the need to promote initiatives to improve coexistence at school at the international level, especially in those located in contexts of social vulnerability. A socio-educational programme has been developed, applied and evaluated at a Singular Education Action Centre (Centro de Acción Educativa Singular – C.A.E.S) in the city of Valencia (Spain). To ascertain the programme's impact and possible generalization to other contexts, a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a control group was used. Information was collected from 297 students and 54 teachers based on questionnaires assessing coexistence at school. The results obtained demonstrate the satisfactory functioning of the programme. The faculty and students from the experimental group affirm the importance of continuing to work in this direction to invest in creating a democratic school that firmly believes in coexistence and participation. Areas for improvement include the need to incorporate actions to increase family participation and develop strategies to facilitate the implementation of a more comprehensive programme.

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Introduction

At present, it is imperative to reconsider the objectives of the education we desire (UNESCO 2015), and the educational institutions from various countries cannot denounce the construction of a participatory citizenry that is critical and responsible. In this manner, we delegate to the school the function of education for peaceful and democratic coexistence with others through tools that advocate a coexistence that is free of stereotypes and respectful of differences (Puig-Gutiérrez and Morales-Lozano 2015; Harbera and Sakade 2009). Reflection upon which democratic values should be taught, in addition to an exploration of how to promote these same values, will be the catalyst that transforms the school of today into a space that may instruct participation and coexistence and advocate for social inclusion. Justice, human rights, tolerance, respect for cultural diversity, conflict prevention and resolution and the culture of peace and reconciliation will undoubtedly be crucial components (Mayor-Zaragoza 2003). We recall how school violence is a subject that continues to concern

and engage professionals around the world because it continues to be a serious social and educational problem that has yet to be resolved (Smith et al. 1999).

However, the complexity of the educational task is growing exponentially, and for schools that take on the roles of institutions that transform reality and as agents of change, it continues to be a challenge for education in the twenty-first century.

It is a call for dialogue among all stakeholders. It is inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development, based on respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future. These are the fundamentals of our common humanity. (UNESCO 2015, 9)

Shared reflection, research and decision-making become necessary tools for this process (Santos-Guerra 2009), and they will be the three pillars that support our study.

Educational policy to coexist in school

Coexistence has been transformed into an educational challenge of the first order, and educational institutions have been transformed into ideal settings for learning and the first trials of these civic values for a citizenry that, transcending its consideration as a simple juristic status or legal possession of a community, remains conceptualized as a solid social and political construction. As García-Raga and López-Martín have stated (2011), coexistence is the 'collective and dynamic construction constituted by the group of human interrelationships established by the stakeholders of the educational community inside the school, between themselves and with the environment itself, within the framework of certain rights and duties, the influence of which goes beyond the boundaries of the school setting' (534).

School, as the backbone of this process, should not only cultivate the learning of interpersonal and social competencies linked with an understanding of the rights, duties and fundamental liberties that serve as the foundation of a democratic citizenry but also become an experimental workshop in which the practices of these ideals are consolidated. As Martín and Puig indicate (2007, 91), 'learning to live democratically can only be obtained by living democratically'.

Thus, practising democracy in school should be part of the educational reality, in which values such as equality, cooperation and inclusion develop meaning (Viguer and Solè 2012). These values are only a few examples that place us at a level where identity and peaceful coexistence take centre stage. However, it is necessary to practice these values and develop them first-hand, with the objective of making these values a part of the norms and structure of the school. Undoubtedly, within this process, the activities and strategies that promote a culture of participation, communication, exchange and contact with the larger educational community become particularly relevant (Viguer and Avià 2009). Thus, the school should configure itself as a setting in which interactions between the various collectives are a part of the everyday routine, with the goal of contributing to the process of building a more cohesive, inclusive and peaceful society, creating a space for interpersonal relationships where learning to live with others is essential.

We learn more and better in positive environments, while simultaneously, we develop people who value solidarity, tolerance, and respect more when we construct social spaces of responsibility and self-regulation within a framework of consensus and respect for established norms. (Fernández 2008, 137)

Consistent with the goal of promoting a participatory and democratic school, various programmes have been promoted that – as the core of their intervention – advocate for coexistence at school; these programmes offer different tools dedicated to meeting the aforementioned challenges. Today, preventing violent behaviour at school is paramount, and the objective is to address smaller conflicts immediately so that they do not develop further and become serious and urgent behavioural issues. In following the discussion of Fisher and Kettl (2003), it is noteworthy that 76% of teachers agree that, in educational institutions, it is necessary to put in place preventive strategies to create spaces for sharing and learning to coexist.

Undoubtedly, educational administrations from various countries have gone beyond simply initiating studies and research concerning this phenomenon and for several decades have already continued to push different policies to promote coexistence at school. Such policies are especially necessary in environments in which social strife is evident. In reflecting upon the intervention policies concerning socially at-risk contexts, we can begin to pinpoint the so-called ‘compensatory education policies’ (Vinovskis 2005) of the United States, intended to compensate for the socio-economic disadvantages that can restrict educational opportunities for children from socially disadvantaged environments. It must be stated that, initially, the primary beneficiaries were children of African-American origin.

Conversely, throughout Europe, there are almost 27 million children at risk of poverty or of social exclusion (Save the Children 2014). In the light of these figures, many countries are already taking the necessary measures.

In the United Kingdom, there are educational policies for intervention in at-risk circumstances that are primarily designed to combat truancy. Through measures such as the so-called ‘extended schools’ (schools geared towards extracurricular activities), among others, the intention is to include every part of the community in the educational process, especially families, with the objective of improving academic performance and learning through activities such as sport, art, and music to relate to children from every neighbourhood. It is an initiative with a goal of maximizing social inclusion.

In France, since the 1980s, policies have been enacted along these same lines, that is, to compensate for and act upon the social, economic and educational inequality endemic to numerous neighbourhoods and, therefore, schools throughout the entire nation. ‘Réseau d’Education Prioritaire’ (R.E.P) is the present designation of this combination of programmes and policies aimed at all educational levels, formerly known as the ‘Zone Education Prioritaire’ (Z.E.P). It must be noted that this type of intervention and action tends to occur in schools belonging to the ‘Zone Urbaine Sensible’ (Z.U.S), in which a multitude of troubles and social, economic and educational problems coalesce (Heurdier 2014).

In Spain, 33.8% of children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion; in addition, Spain is the European nation with the largest number of school drop-outs, reaching up to 25% (Save the Children 2014). Numerous foundations, associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – both national and international – in collaboration with the Spanish Ministry of Education are rolling out socio-educational intervention programmes in schools and neighbourhoods located in areas that contain serious economic, social and educational difficulties (Save The Children, Secretariado Gitano, the Ayuda a Niños y Adolescentes en Riesgo [ANAR] Foundation, and the Yehudi Menuhin Foundation – Spain – social and educational inclusion through art are among the many organizations).

At the autonomous level, in Valencia, the context in which this study was developed, it is noteworthy that, in 1988, the first Decree was enacted that established the first B.A.P. Plan [Plan Conjunto de Actuación de Barrios de Acción Preferente – B.A.P.], with the goal of responding to the needs, both social and economic, of the neighbourhoods. At the educational level, in these same neighbourhoods that were situated in areas of social vulnerability, the so-called C.A.E.S (Centros de Acción Educativa Singular) emerged in 2001. These centres consisted of a student population in which 30% or more needed educational support. With the help of autonomous-level educational policies, these centres are responsible for combating the educational and social inequalities that affect the student population of the centre. It is noteworthy that committed professionals work in many of these centres and that these professionals consider a firm commitment to working strategies that improve coexistence to be a primary starting point.

Educational strategies for improving coexistence at school in educational contexts of social vulnerability

Each of the aforementioned intervention policies depends on the impetus of different pedagogical strategies to meet the challenge of coexistence in educational institutions.

Among others, we would like to begin with the so-called ‘classroom assembly’, previously referred to by the pedagogue Freinet (1971). It involves an educational strategy that promotes participation, communication, meeting and reflection. Today’s society, generally, and education in particular, require spaces and time for dialogue and shared reflection, not only for mere productivity but also for learning through participation, listening, conversing and sharing (Silver and Jacklin 2015). We concur with Jares (2006) that ‘dialogue is another of the essential components of the pedagogy of coexistence. There is no coexistence without dialogue’ (22). Consequently, designating a part of the time – in the curriculum – for conversation that is orderly and based on respect and active listening proves enriching, as much for the students as for the teachers.

There are various models of classroom assembly, such as that proposed by Haman (2009), who created an ordered and systematic proposal. Pérez-Pérez (2007) also conceives the assembly as an educational space for democratic coexistence, advocating a model based on dialogue, participation and peacefulness via strategies that empower learning in an active and dynamic manner.

Other initiatives framed within the model known as ‘peer assistance’ exist, offering benefits geared towards the construction of democratic schools.

This fact transforms classmates into the first agents of intervention, those who possess the most information and those who – simultaneously – help one another in the majority of occasions. Therefore, these are the appropriate agents for intervention in conflicts between students. (Fernández 2008, 142)

Cowie and Wallace (2000) state the following as principal characteristics of peer assistance:

- Interactions among peers help reduce prejudice and cultivate confidence between genders and ethnic groups.
- Peer assistance offers students the chance to learn communication skills and to reflect upon their own emotions.

- Practicing helpfulness among peers is a training exercise to help address conflicts and to help classmates relate to one another in a more constructive – and non-violent – manner.

Along these lines, we will next present the peer assistance strategies chosen to configure this programme, and the subject of the study, because we consider them to be the most appropriate for working within the contexts of socially vulnerable situations.

First, there is the so-called '*paired reading*' or '*reading in pairs*' (Durán and Blanch 2015), which consists of tutored students improving their reading ability with the help of a student tutor. It is a means of sharing the reading, but beyond strengthening bonds, it is a means of acquiring responsibilities, enabling autonomy, creating significant learning contexts and improving the social relationships between students of different ages.

On the other hand, the playground tends to be a space where conflicts emerge (Volk et al. 2015) because the freedom enjoyed by the student population during recess causes differences to grow and contributes to the development of conflicts that – if they are not resolved early – end up becoming more serious behavioural problems or even assault or abuse. If it is true that conflicts are natural in all relationships, then it is crucial to confront the conflicts at the outset and in a democratic manner (García-Raga, Martínez-Usarralde, and Sahuquillo 2012).

The playground should be reconceptualized as an opportunity for social growth, as a learning opportunity for peaceful coexistence and as an opportunity for enjoyment outside of academic settings (Leff, Costigan, and Power 2004). One of the proposals is the creation of an alternate recess location, operated by upper level students. Within this space – preferably one near a playground that has not been previously designated for academic activities – one can find board games and sporting equipment for the purposes of improving social relationships, avoiding moments of boredom and exclusion for students who do not enjoy the practice of ordinary recess activities (Pellegrini and Bjorklund 1996).

Moreover, although these strategies have not been selected because we have already invested in a programme comprising three strategies, it can also be very interesting to enact the following strategies (described below).

Of note is the creation of interactive groups (Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008) as another strategy that empowers learning between peers. The formation of heterogeneous groups and the inclusion of family members or volunteers in classrooms to incorporate diverse topics undoubtedly enrich both academic and social lives, promoting cooperative work and including different ways of understanding new knowledge.

From this same perspective, the 'student assistant' initiative (Torrego 2012) can be very interesting; it benefits not only the students needing help but also the student helpers, given that they acquire responsibilities that ultimately support, assist, include and improve interpersonal relationships. It requires the participation and the formation of an entire educational community, particularly on the part of teachers and on the part of student assistants.

Finally, in close proximity to this last initiative, we find the so-called 'peer mediation', one of the most appropriate options for democratically managing the conflicts that occur in secondary educational institutions. Peer mediation involves 'a structured process of conflict management in which opposing people meet in the presence of a mediator and, through dialogue, find resolutions to the problem together' (Boqué 2005, 130).

Objectives

The primary objective of this particular study is to demonstrate the functionality of a socio-educational programme that improves coexistence within socially vulnerable environments, as a result of a study undertaken in a centre whose population finds itself at-risk of social exclusion in Valencia (Spain), from the perspectives of both students and teachers from the same educational centre. Based on this study, we specify a series of specific objectives:

- To determine the principal and initial characteristics of two centres that form a part of this study through the performance of a diagnostic evaluation.
- To design an intervention programme that corresponds to the needs that were initially detected.
- To implement the intervention plan in a collaborative manner with the faculty of the experimental centre.
- To complete a final evaluation to ascertain the effects caused by the launch of the intervention programme.
- To propose this current programme as a tool that can work in centres situated in similar circumstances at the international level.

Method

Design

A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a control group was used (Table 1).

The evaluation instruments were administered at random among the student body and the faculty of the two centres in both the initial evaluation and the final evaluation to avoid adverse effects.

Participants

The study was developed in two scholastic centres of primary education (from 6 to 12 years of age) with similar characteristics located on the periphery of Valencia (Spain). We worked with a total of 262 participants, of whom 208 were students (99 from Group A and 109 from Group B) and 54 were teachers (24 from Group A and 30 from Group B). Next, we describe the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample according to the gender, age and grade level of the student body (Table 2) and according to the gender, experience and role of the faculty (Table 3). In each of the cases, we specify the sample distribution according to the reference centre (control [contr] and experimental [exp]).

Context

Both centres are located in two peripheral areas around the city of Valencia, where we find a coalescence of a great variety of characteristics such as poverty, marginalization and

Table 1. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest.

Group	Pretest	Programme	Posttest
A. Experimental group	X	X	X
B. Control group	X		X

Table 2. Primary students sample according to sex, age and school year.

Sex	Contr	Exp	Total	Age	Contr (%)	Exp (%)	School year	Contr (%)	Exp (%)
Boy	54	57	111	6 years old	8	9.2	Year 1	14.2	10
				7 years old	12.3	10.2	Year 2	11	13.4
				8 years old	10.2	13.5	Year 3	15.4	19
Girl	45	52	97	9 years old	20	18.8	Year 4	21.1	18.1
				10 years old	16.2	14.5	Year 5	16	15
				11 years old	15.1	15.6	Year 6	22.3	24.5
Total	99	109	208	12 years old	14	16.2			
				13 years old	4.2	2			

Table 3. Teaching staff according to centre, experience and role.

Sex	Contr	Exp	Total	First year in the centre		¿Are they classroom tutors?		
				Contr	Exp	Contr	Exp	
Woman	25	15	40	Yes	23.3	29.2	Yes	46.7
Man	5	9	14					
Total	30	24	54	No	76.7	70.8	No	53.3

delinquency (Uceda, Matamales, and Montón 2011). These are areas of the city and of the province that were hit particularly hard by the crisis, and they are certainly home to high unemployment and child poverty rates (Save the Children 2014). It is for these reasons that these areas are considered *vulnerable neighbourhoods*. Consequently, many different entities and foundations have expressed concern and have intervened in both areas via socio-educational intervention and socio-occupational placement even though these areas continue to house serious problems of social strife.

Instruments

We have applied two evaluation questionnaires for coexistence at school – one for the faculty and one for primary schoolchildren – formulated by Ortega and Del Rey (2003) and developed at the international level (Cangas et al. 2007; Gázquez et al. 2009). Both questionnaires consist of 12 questions, with 8 being closed-ended and 4 being open-ended.

The adaptation performed for the first-cycle student body resulted in 13 closed-ended questions. They involve questions with three answer options in the form of icons to facilitate their development. However, it must be noted that the response ranges for the surveys applied to the second- and third- cycle student body and to the faculty have been adapted. To guarantee the reliability of the collected information, the administration of the questionnaires was directly coordinated by the authors of this article.

We present the selected items below for subsequent analysis, and we present the respective ranges of the adapted responses (Charts 1–3).

Intervention programme

We elaborated an initial evaluation to detect the primary needs of both centres and we concluded that school violence is at the forefront of these centres, along with the lack of cohesion and motivation among the student body. Concerning the teaching staff of both centres, the demand for new education strategies was at the top of the agenda at the latent hopelessness that causes confusion and demotivation. After analysing the results obtained

Chart 1. Questions selected from the survey for primary students, key stage 1.

Items	Response scale
4. How do you feel about your peers?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
5. How do you feel about your teachers?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
6. Does your family consult with the teachers?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
7. Do your peers like you?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
8. Do your teachers like you?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
9. Do you always follow the class rules?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
10. Do you always follow them on the playground?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
11. Do you always follow them in the classroom?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
12. Do you make fun of other children?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
13. Do you let other children play alone?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good
14. Do you enjoy yourself in class?	1 bad, 2 average, 3 good

Source: adapted from Ortega and Del Rey (2003).

Chart 2. Questions selected from the survey for primary students, key stage 2.

Items	Response scale
4. How do you get along with your peers?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
5. How do you get along with your teachers?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
6. What do you feel your peers think of you?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
7. What do you feel your teachers think of you?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
8. Do different teachers have distinct class rules?	1 very many, 2 many, 3 some 4 none
9. Do families participate in school life?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
10.2. Do families participate in festivities?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
10.3. Do families go to school to pick up grades?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
10.4. Do families come to school when called?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
10.5. Do families come to school if a child is doing poorly?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
10.6. Are families part of the AMPA?	1 most, 2 some, 3 almost none, 4 none
11.1. Are there clashes between groups of students and teachers?	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.2. Bad words in class	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.3. Rules are not followed	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.4. Students insult each other	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.5. Students fight	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.6. There are groups that don't get along	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.7. There are children who are excluded and feel alone	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.8. The teachers do their own thing	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all
11.9. The students feel that the teachers don't understand them	1 a lot, 2 average, 3 a little, 4 not at all

Source: adapted from Ortega and Del Rey (2003).

in the initial evaluation – displayed in more detail in subsequent sections – and the theoretical substantiation undertaken, we designed a socio-educational intervention programme tailored to the needs detected in the experimental centre and implemented for 8 months (Table 4).

The ultimate aim of this programme is to reduce truancy, to increase the students' feeling of belonging to their centres and to avoid episodes of school violence and bullying. A programme, therefore, that advocates for prevention rather than intervention and considers the former key for the school democratization process. Henceforth, promoting the coexistence and the culture of peace at school through setting up democratizing and motivational education strategies, in which all the education community actively take part, has been considered paramount.

Thus, the first part of the programme consisted of implementing three of the strategies displayed in the previous pages – prior faculty training –, selected for being the most suitable at an educational level and having considered the needs and the ages of the recipients as

Chart 3. Questions selected from the survey for teaching staff.

Items	Response scale
6. How would you say you get along with your peers?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
7. How would you say you get along with the students at the centre?	1 good, 2 normal, 3 average, 4 bad
8. How do you feel your peers see you?	1 very positive, 2 neither good nor bad, 3 they don't really know me, 4 I think they have a bad picture
9. How do you feel your students see you?	1 very positive, 2 neither good nor bad, 3 they don't really know me, 4 I think they have a bad picture
10. Do you think there are differences between your class rules and those of other teachers?	1 very many, 2 many, 3 some 4 none
11. How is your relationship with the families of your students?	1 very good, 2 good, 3 average, 4 bad
12.1. To what extent should families participate in school life? AMPA (Parents Association)	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
12.2. To what extent should families participate in school life? Attention to academic performance	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
12.3. To what extent should families participate in school life? Complementary affairs	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
12.4. To what extent should families participate in school life? Plans for coexistence	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
12.5. To what extent should families participate in school life? The child is doing poorly	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
12.6. To what extent should families participate in school life? If called	1 a lot, 2 many, 3 a little, 4 never
13.1. How often do clashes occur between groups of students and the teachers?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.2. How often are bad words repeated in class?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.3. How often are class rules broken?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.4. How often do students insult each other?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.5. How often do students fight?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.6. How often do clashes occur between student groups that don't get along?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.7. Are there children who are excluded and feel alone?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.8. Do teachers at the centre do their own thing?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.9. Do you feel that students think the teachers don't understand them?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot
13.10. Do you feel that the students at the centre are unmotivated and get bored?	1 not at all, 2 a little, 3 average, 4 a lot

Source: adapted from Ortega and Del Rey (2003).

Table 4. Synthesis of the intervention program.

		Training of teaching staff	1st term	2nd term	3rd term
Part I	Class assembly ^a	September and October 2014	All students	All students	All students
	Paired reading Games classroom	Training day sessions of teaching staff			
Part II	Break dance (Physical education)	Presentation of the network of Human Rights Friendly Schools	Key stage 1	Key stage 2 (years 5–6)	Key stage 2 (years 3–4)
	Shadow play (Valencian language)		Key stage 2 (years 3–4)	Key stage 1	Key stage 2 (years 5–6)
	Graffiti (Artistic and visual education)		Key stage 2 (years 5–6)	Key stage 2 (years 3–4)	Key stage 1

^aWe have produced an adaptation model based on the one presented by the Ministry of Education of Peru (2009) to create an approach consistent with the working context.

well as the application context: classroom assembly, *paired reading* and alternate recess to playground time. All form teachers implemented classroom assembly and *pair-reading* was established once a week, when all the higher levels visited the classrooms of lower levels to

share readings selected by themselves, encouraging the value for reading. Lastly, the game room (alternate recess to playground time) was fitted with sport equipment and board games, providing an ideal place to be used. In this regard, the second part of the intervention had to do with art mediation through workshops¹ implemented in three of the curriculum subjects in order to work academic content. Artists, in collaboration with the specialist teacher, developed these workshops, coordinating the sessions to transform art into an educational tool.

It is worth stressing that the truly enriching thing is the complementarity of both parts of the programme. On the one hand, we need to create horizontal and democratic schools, making the most vulnerable part of the population visible and on the other hand, art and hip-hop culture in this case are the way to engage and motivate the student body, in a break with the closed structures of the traditional school. This way, we have implemented a programme whose application could affect coexistence at school as a mechanism to improve the social circumstances and the difficulties these educational centres find themselves in, immersed in contexts with too much influence. It is true that more assistance-oriented interventions are also necessary, but education overall and education for coexistence in particular can become the vectors of social change. Therefore, our research question is, can a democratic coexistence programme improve school culture in those centres that are in contexts at risk of social exclusion?

Statistical analysis

The descriptive analyses obtained in the *pretest* and *posttest* were processed with the support of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (version 22). Firstly, we have analysed data to determine if they follow a normal distribution, in order to be able to select the statistical testing we needed to undertake. As they did not follow a normal distribution, we opted for the application of nonparametric tests where the testing was formulated based on the median of the distribution. Thus, we performed the Mann–Whitney U test to check the heterogeneity of two independent samples, and the Wilcoxon test to assess the significance of two related samples. Both tests have made it possible to check the statistically significant differences and to look into the changes that the programme has encouraged at group and centre level, as this is the object of the study.

Results

Next, we present the results according to three study groups – the first cycle of primary education (1st and 2nd grades, 6–8 years of age) (Figures 1 and 2); the second and third cycles (3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grades, 8–12 years of age) (Figures 3 and 4), and the faculty (Figures 5 and 6) – and their distribution by centre (control and experimental) for each of the stages of evaluation, *pretest* and *posttest*. It is important to note that the process of analysis of the results has been developed paying special attention to the differences detected between both study groups (experimental group and control group), based on the understanding that it is at this point where the implementation of the programme specially has an impact.

The results from the control group show minimal changes. In the experimental centre, there is a positive result in each of the items because all of them exceed 2.2 points on a

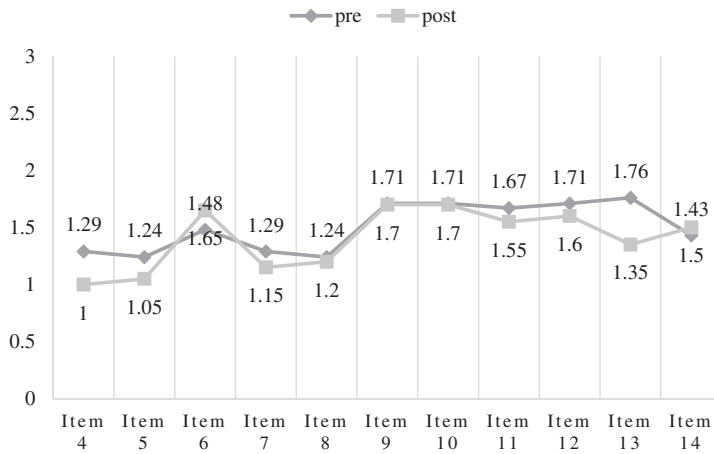


Figure 1. Descriptive results of primary students, key stage 1. Control group.

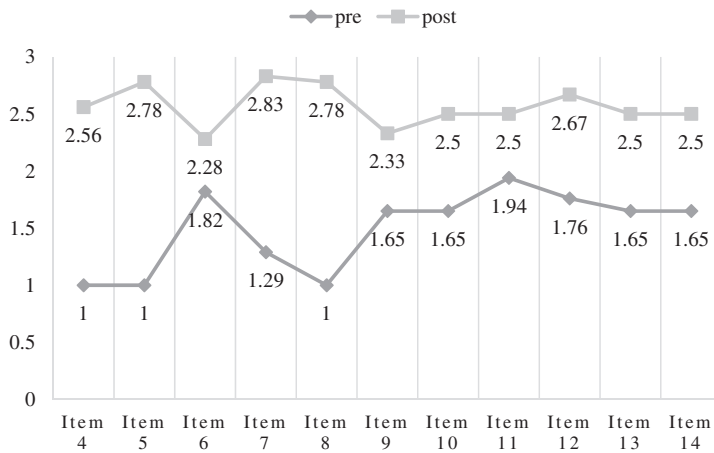


Figure 2. Descriptive results of primary students, key stage 1. Experimental group.

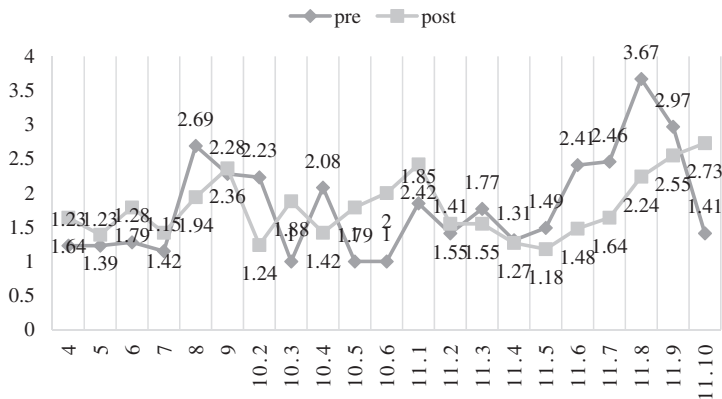


Figure 3. Descriptive results of primary students, key stage 2. Control group.

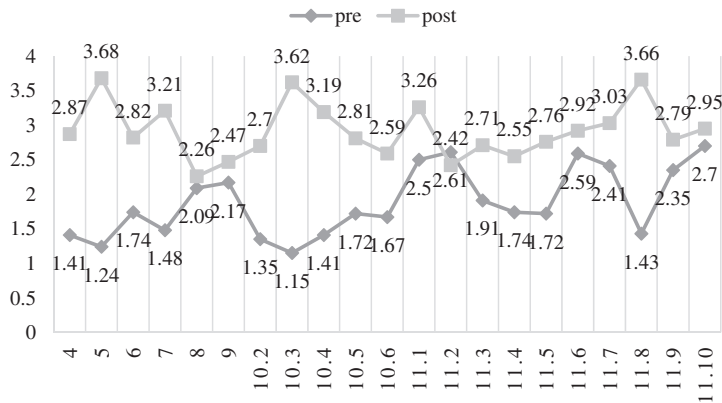


Figure 4. Descriptive results of primary students, key stage 2. Experimental group.

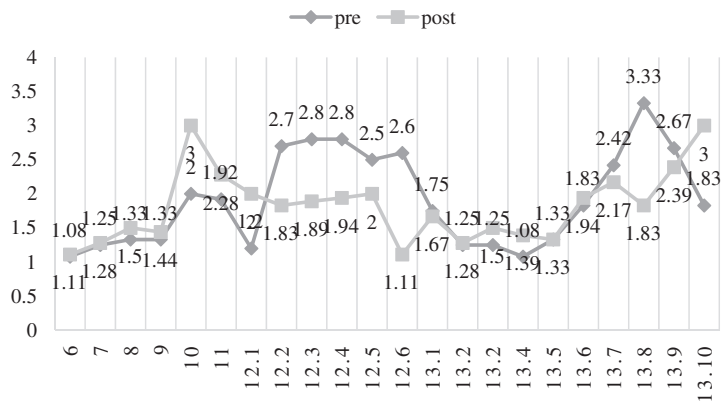


Figure 5. Descriptive results of teaching staff. Control group.

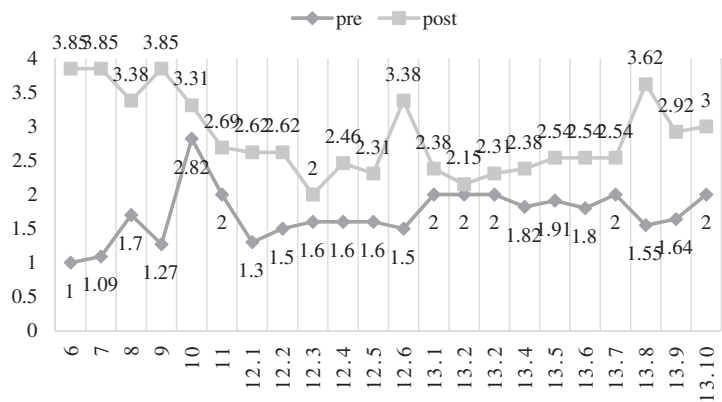


Figure 6. Descriptive results of teaching staff. Experimental group.

three-point scale. Similarly, we observe that the greatest improvement from the intervention has been in item 5 (How do you feel about the teachers? [mean 2.78]), with item 7 (Do your classmates like you? [mean 2.83]) and item 5 (Do your teachers like you? [mean 2.78]).

In the control group, we discern changes but without a clear tendency. However, in the experimental centre, we observe a positive result in each of the items except for item number 11.2 (Bad language in class) because each of the items exceeds 2.2 points. Nonetheless, we observe greater improvement among items 5 (Do you get along with your teachers? [mean 3.68]), 10.3 (Do your family members go to school to collect your grades? [mean 3.62]) and 11.8 (Teachers go about their own business [mean 3.66]).

In the faculty, we can discern that the teachers in the control group only improve in a few intermediate points. In the experimental group, we observe a clearly positive tendency in all of the items. The highest scores stand out in items 6 (How would you say you get along with your colleagues? [mean 3.85]), 7 (How would you say you get along with the centre’s students? [mean 3.87]) and 9 (What image do you think your students have of you? [mean 3.87]).

After verifying – at the descriptive level – an apparent improvement in coexistence at school due to intervention in the experimental group, we should verify the significant difference (less than 0.05) between the two stages of the evaluation, with the aim of carrying out an in-depth analysis and assess the detected differences (Table 5). Besides, we have verified significant differences between centres to ensure the value of the programme in improving coexistence (Table 6). In this regard, it is worth highlighting that the results are oriented to identify the improvement in the climate of the centre, not on an individual basis.

As the data indicate, there were no significant differences between the *pretest* and *posttest* in any of the groups for the control centre. However, the differences are significant in every case in the experimental group. Therefore, we can affirm that the positive change exerted by both the primary school student body and the faculty from the experimental centre – with regard to coexistence at school – is due to the intervention received from the programme.

Table 5. Results of Wilcoxon analysis between control group and experimental group samples.

	Key stage 1 post – key stage 1 pre	Key stage 2 post – key stage 2 pre	Teaching staff_post – teaching staff_pre
<i>Wilcoxon control group: Contrast statistics</i>			
Z	-1.245	-0.571	-0.408
(Bilateral) asymptotic significance	0.213	0.568	0.683
<i>Wilcoxon experimental group: Contrast statistics</i>			
Z	-3.629	-5.375	-2.934
(Bilateral) asymptotic significance	0.000*	0.000*	0.003*

*Statistically significant difference.

Table 6. Results of Mann-Whitney *U* analysis among centres.

Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> for:	Key stage 1 pre	Key stage 1 post	Key stage 2 pre	Key stage 2 post	Teaching staff pre	Teaching staff post
<i>Contrast statistics</i>						
	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	140	3	858	0	44	0
Wilcoxon test W	350	234	1638	561	110	171
Z	-0.924	-5.251	-0.344	-7.234	-1.358	-4.693
(Bilateral) asymptotic significance	0.356	0.000*	0.731	0.000*	0.175	0.000*

*Statistically significant difference.

Finally, we can affirm that, in the initial stages of the evaluation, there are no significant differences in the primary school student body or among the faculty of both centres, which indicates that, from the outset, we have worked with statistically similar groups. Conversely, we corroborate a significant difference in the final stages of the evaluation between both centres, based on which we can determine the effect of the intervention designed to that end.

Definitively, we can attest to the consequence of the performed intervention in a positive manner because we have obtained elevated, positive tendencies at the descriptive level in the experimental group. We can also determine significant evidence with regard to the differences established from the intervention developed in the experimental group, as detected in the previously presented data in contrast to the control group. Therefore, in response to the question of the initial research we can undoubtedly note that the programme improved coexistence and fostered the school culture, encouraging social cohesion and significantly decreasing school violence.

Discussion and conclusions

Recalling the education policies at an international level on school coexistence related issues, it is worth stressing that this programme, based on the findings, represents a breakthrough. Changing the traditional school model, restoring the voice of the education community, creating space for dialogue and joint decision-making, encouraging bonds through reading and working on academic content through art are all proposals that are working and can work in contexts with similar characteristics. It is certainly an issue that, as we have previously seen, concerns countries like the USA, the UK, France and Spain, and it is for this reason that it is essential to share the results derived from scientific researches which prove that changes start at school.

In accordance with the primary objective of this study, we have verified that the proposed programme for the improvement of coexistence in socially at-risk environments has succeeded, based on the perceptions of the student body and the faculty. In general terms, one can say that the different strategies for peer assistance that have been put into effect in the centres have been positive in reducing violence in schools, in line with Cowie et al. (2002) and Naylor and Cowie (1999), according to the demonstrated results. By violence at school, we understand the deliberate actions that harm or can harm third parties at school or its vicinity (Imberti 2006).

As noted above, the student body determined that the classroom assembly, the *paired reading*, the game room and the workshops undertaken have promoted the creation of a series of structures for participation and communication, significantly reducing confrontations and aggression. Regarding this point, we would like to note that other international studies, such as those undertaken by Turnuklua et al. (2010) and Akguna and Araz (2014), have also highlighted the effective application of coexistence programmes in reducing aggression.

Similarly, the faculty indicates the improved climate within the centre starting with programme implementation, with the mean in each of the items increasing (above 2.5 points on a four-point scale). Moreover, the responses of faculty members denote a certain desire

to work to implement strategies to improve coexistence. Similar results have been confirmed in studies undertaken by Hakvoort and Olsson (2014) and Peñalva-Vélez et al. (2015).

Nonetheless, we are aware that every educational programme should always subject itself to evaluation not only to ascertain its benefits but also to improve in those aspects in which significant improvements have not been observed.

From this perspective, we consider that the programme should incorporate actions that would boost family participation, given that this aspect is prominent and necessary according to all of the participating audiences. We could suggest that this has issue been one of the weakest points of the programme and that, to amplify the educational benefits, the programme should incorporate activities that combine the efforts of school and family. Doing so would involve creating dynamic and active participation structures to give families a voice and a vote so that they may play an active role in the educational community, facilitating their collaboration to educate on democratic coexistence (Viguer and Solé 2012). Similarly, entities, associations and NGOs from the neighbourhoods should play a more active role to contribute to the creation of a school that is open to the neighbourhood and to the citizenry, as affirmed by the participating faculty in the qualitatively analysed results.

It would also be very interesting to include the student assistant initiative (Torrego 2012) because, as noted in previous sections, it is another strategy that offers different educational advantages, such as conflict resolution with the involvement of the student body, increased responsibility, communication and participation. Similarly, creating interactive groups (Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008) in different classrooms can also be put into practice to increase cooperation among the student body. Doing so involves continuing to examine the development of the socio-educational resources that promote communication, participation and the democratic handling of conflicts and that definitively work towards the coexistence and cohesion of the integrated groups (García-Raga, Martínez-Usarralde, and Sahuquillo 2012) in presenting a more complete proposal.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that we are aware that, for subsequent analyses, we should increase the sample size and consider the assessments of other agents of the educational community with which to contrast the opinions of the student body and the faculty, creating a more comprehensive study. On the other hand, we wish to comment that the application of a programme with the proposed components is already underway in another centre (the centre that served as a control group for the present study), which is allowing another approach for an even more improved educational proposal that strongly promotes a democratic education and that could be undertaken in similar educational centres in Spain or in other countries, albeit with the pertinent changes necessary for each setting.

Therefore, we conclude this article by referencing the need for continued efforts in the proposal of measures and programmes that may improve educational quality in areas of social vulnerability, in which learning peace is a necessity that concerns educational professionals who work every day, around the world, towards a society free from violence.

Note

1. These workshops were developed in collaboration with the NGO Amnesty International through the Network of Schools for Human Rights of Valencia (Red de Escuelas por los Derechos Humanos de Valencia), Spain.

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