

## CONFLICT AND COEXISTENCE: RESEARCH WITH 15-16 YEAR OLD SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN A SEVILLE SUBURB<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** A description is given of a study which formed the body of a doctoral thesis, conducted during the 2010/11 school year with a group of 15-16 year old pupils in a suburban secondary school in Seville. The author, the group's teacher, implemented with them an innovative classroom syllabus and applied evaluative methods to track the pupils' learning performance, his own professional development and the influence of the school's culture.

**Keywords.** Professional practical problems, educational innovation, curricular experimentation, action research.

**Resumen.** Presentamos una investigación que ha tomado la forma de tesis doctoral y que se ha realizado durante el curso 2010-11 con un grupo de alumnos de 4º de ESO de un Instituto de la periferia de la ciudad de Sevilla. Partiendo de problema prácticos profesionales, el autor, que es el profesor del grupo e investigador, ha experimentado una programación de aula innovadora y ha hecho un seguimiento de sus resultados en cuanto al aprendizaje de los alumnos, al desarrollo profesional del profesor y a la influencia de la cultura del centro, a través de una investigación evaluativa.

**Palabras clave.** Problemas prácticos profesionales, innovación educativa, experimentación curricular, investigación-acción.

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper is the synthesis of a doctoral thesis (Pineda, 2013) which focuses on the practical professional problems of a secondary school teacher. In particular, it deals with what has come to be called the 'professional malaise' resulting from the clash of cultures and generational conflict in the classroom, and which is manifested symptomatically in the secondary school in the pupils' disaffection and lack of interest and the teacher's subsequent frustration.

The traditional mechanism of conflict denial and escape is to project the responsibility onto someone else. In contrast, the approach in the present study was to take a more reflexive and introspective path which crystallized into an idea and a proposal. The idea, simply, was that classroom power relationships are alienating for both parties. And the proposal was that one way to manage this conflictive relationship positively might be to actively seek mutual recognition between teacher and pupils. From this per-

spective, the obverse of such a classroom would be one in which the teacher feels a lack of recognition and a sense of frustration with the disaffection of his or her pupils, and in which the pupils count for nothing in the school in general and in the everyday management of classroom affairs in particular. Such a failure to involve the pupils in school and class culture, manifest in the difficulty of achieving their genuine participation, was the motivation for initiating a process of curricular experimentation, evaluation research and professional development.

This more reflective and self-critical attitude was thus embodied in the idea of the need for recognition of the pupils. It implied that there had to be some suspension of the teacher's own knowledge and status so as to give the floor to the other party –the pupils– and escape from the dead end represented by the clash in attitudes. In sum, a new pattern of relationships in the classroom needed to be constructed in which both parties would feel treated like people.

This change carried along with it the rest of the elements involved in the curriculum: the methodological approach needed to respect the principal role played by the pupils and the content needed to be selected and organized with a logic that also took into account its relevance to them. To this end, a review was made of the literature concerning various proposals for curriculum integration and other social science curriculum projects. These were found to be very useful in constructing a 'context of classroom research' in the particular case of the present work – teaching social sciences in the fourth year of Compulsory Secondary Education (pupils 15-16 years old, '4th of ESO' in Spain, equivalent to 'Year 10' in the education system of England and Wales). A concept which emerged in teaching this course and that was a unifying focus of educational content and meaning was that of 'conflict and coexistence', whether in the classroom, in the school, in the neighbourhood, or in the family.

Indeed, as well as the teacher and his pupils needing to get on fruitfully together in their classroom context, another issue underlying the present research was the need for a culture of coexistence in the school in which the researcher was a teacher – a 'Centre of Preferential Attention' in Seville. The school is in Torreblanca, a suburb of the city of Seville, located at the limit of the city's administrative area, isolated and surrounded by a belt of undeveloped spaces. In common with all such liminal spaces, it is a neighbourhood that is conflictive, fragmented and marked by exclusion. Indeed, the Andalusian Regional Government has declared it a 'Zone in Need of Social Transformation' and has specifically included it in the Region's 'Planes Integrales' [Comprehensive Plans]. While inequality and internal segmentation make up a dual image of the neighbourhood, its most degraded part constitutes the census district in Seville with the greatest proportion of households categorized as excluded (69%), overcrowded (59%), lacking in basic facilities (43%) and with all members unemployed (39.7%).<sup>2</sup> The school has addressed the problem of coexistence through projects and programmes offered by Andalusia's Consejería [Regional Government Ministry] of Education. Specifically, as part of the Coexistence Plan, various bodies and instruments have been set up in the school, including the Commission on Coexistence, the Coexistence Classroom, the Space of Peace School Project, the School Mediation Workshop, the Workshop on Reflection, etc.

With this problem context clearly identified as being in reality shortcomings in relation to the ability to get on together and to learn from conflict, the researcher, as a teacher there himself, began to develop of a plan of action in which coexistence would be the object of inquiry

in a social sciences class of the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education. This plan took the form of a curriculum project as an 'area of classroom research' on 'conflict and coexistence'.

### **THE PROPOSAL: AN AREA OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH ON 'CONFLICT AND COEXISTENCE'**

From the perspective of the 'Classroom Research and Renovation [Investigación y Renovación Escolar]' (IRES) Project, the 'areas of classroom research' (ACRs) constitute curricular organizing elements addressing the need to specify and define what knowledge is desirable at school level (Grupo Investigación en la Escuela, 1991, vol. 4). The ACR of the present research was tested with a group of 4th year secondary-education pupils and subjected to techniques of evaluative inquiry in some of its teaching units. The intention was twofold: to improve both the pupils' learning and the teacher's professional development. Given this desire to be of practical use, there clearly needed to be respect for the basic framework of the prescribed curriculum. Certainly in the case of Andalusia, however, this in no way represented any fundamental obstacle since the Region's official curriculum is flexible in the interpretations it allows. Indeed, one aim in the design of the proposal was to work explicitly towards some of the goals set out in that curriculum.

A practical classroom approach to the issues surrounding conflict and coexistence may well have great educational potential. It serves the interests of the pupils and is also relevant from the point of view of the academic disciplines related to the humanities and social sciences. It can cover major parts of the prescribed curricular content since much of contemporary history is woven around the phenomenon of conflict. It is also relevant socially since it is evidently a problem that is symptomatic of the many ills afflicting the contemporary world, such as the extreme and growing inequality between and within countries, and the desire for domination and possession which has its manifestation in war.

The basic path followed was to first to recognize and clearly lay out some of the problems felt by the pupils as such, followed by a phase of interaction between the pupils' conceptions and the new information they were provided with in class, to arrive finally at their each drawing conclusions which they communicated to the rest of their classmates. The methodological strategy was thus one of working with specific problems as focal points (García Díaz, 1998; García Pérez, 2000). The process included periods of individual work allowing the teacher to moni-

tor each pupil's progress and difficulties and periods of group work with pooled discussion and conclusions and debate. Indeed, of course, such group work constitutes social and communicative learning of value in itself.

Group work also facilitated the teacher's task of more closely and effectively adjusting his communication to the pupils in his class. The author is convinced that no methodological change or new design and organization of the content can be viable unless accompanied by a radical change in the relationships within the classroom. New content and new methodological approaches are inseparable from the classroom environment. They each feed off each other. Group work also develops the pupils' ability to express themselves and defend their opinion in a reasoned, rigorous and tolerant fashion, respecting others' arguments and opinions and developing a relativistic sense of knowledge.

In addition to the basic sequence of activities characteristic of a process of classroom research, the present proposal began with an activity in which the research problems were formulated and the research procedure was planned. The cycle was closed with the proposal of new research problems opened up by the results of the present research. The aim with this was to foster the skills of posing problems and working with them. These represent a progression in the capacity for the abstraction of knowledge and a profound change of mentality in terms of the nature and value of knowledge. In particular of course, they also help develop the capacity to plan, implement and solve the specific research problems that the class has been set. These procedural skills of working with problems were also accompanied by activities of reflection on the learning process itself. With the completion of the activities, the aim was for the pupils to be able to draw conclusions on the basis of their own arguments, with tolerance and listening to and critically engaging with their classmates. The typical obstacles in this terrain come from the inertia of repetition and copying. A final activity is for the pupils to apply what they have learnt to some other situation or context, with the teacher evaluating their capacity to transfer their learning.

The intention with the blocks of content was to try to bring together problematic issues that correspond to society in general with ones that are individual so as to connect with the pupils' personal interests and everyday experience. The particular class of issues considered was that of conflict between peers and between non-peers, since enmity, quarrels, mutual distrust and lack of communication conform the conflictive part of the background to one's everyday imaginary. Such reflections also connect

with teenagers' inner search and need to understand their own emotions and impulses at that crucial moment of the construction of their identity. Furthermore, the phenomenology linked with one's own close experiences can serve as a test-bed for the observation at a small-scale of behaviours and attitudes that have their correlates at the social scale. The essence of the idea is therefore to work at different scales, connecting the personal imaginary to the collective imaginary through analogy and comparing individual conflict (manifest in misunderstandings, selfishness and the escalation of confrontation and violence) with collective conflict (manifest in antagonism and the confrontation of interests). The blocks of content were the following:

Block 1. Why do conflicts occur? Does conflict form part of coexisting? How can you coexist while accepting that there are conflicts? Is it possible to learn from them? How do you manage conflict in an institution like a school?

Block 2. Do interpersonal conflicts and social, civil, or international conflicts have the same causes and the same consequences? Are authoritarianism, intolerance and fanaticism the causes of failures to coexist?

Block 3. Could a coup d'état or a civil war happen again in Spain? How did our grandparents live in a dictatorship? What is left over for us from that time?

Block 4. Can there be real peace after a war? Are we able to recognize our mistakes?

Block 5. Is war a business? Are greed and lust for power part of our nature?

Block 6. Could a nuclear war destroy our planet? Is man a rational animal?

Block 7. Has ideological confrontation been replaced by a clash of civilizations? Do we need enemies to affirm what we are?

In the first block, the aim is to start from the pupils' own close experiences to go on to reflect on the phenomenon of conflict, its procedural nature, its causes and its consequences. We try to use their experience of conflict to lead them to rethink various specific situations and draw conclusions, i.e., using this individual scale as a test-bed on which to make a comparative analysis with phenomena occurring on the social scale. Some concepts of transition are applied in progressing from the specific and

perceptible to the complex nature of social phenomena: ‘the role’ or social function and ‘the institution’. We believe that these concepts constitute a step in abstraction in the transition from the individual to the collective and hence in developing the capacity to understand social phenomena.

Within this block, we are also interested in the analysis of conflict management and coexistence in an institution – in schools in particular. The issue proposed is that of pupils’ rights and their relationship with their teachers, putting to the class that they examine and research into the situation of this issue in our own school as an organization. The objective is to understand how institutions function in this sense, i.e. how the tensions that arise within an institution as a result of the clash of interests and unequal power lead to conflicts.

Based on the research problems selected by the pupils at the end of this first block, we then work on different conflict scenarios at the social scale – between groups or between countries. The pupils are invited to reflect on the consequences of individual attitudes at a collective scale and on character traits of those who hold power or prominence. We believe that the concepts of ‘leadership’, ‘scapegoat’ and ‘social emergent’ as social roles or functions have educational relevance. They are very useful as structuring elements to help understand social phenomena since they are at the crossroads between the individual and the collective. The leader can be regarded as an emergent that is created and elevated by collective needs and desires and who takes on prominence and influence in the future of the community. The leader influences the community, but also ‘represents’ it since the community generates and elevates different types of leader in accordance with its historical, political, economic and collective-mentality circumstances. What his or her personality and behaviour are like is a result of the settling out of a given historical situation from a social culture medium. This concept can make it easier to understand social phenomena because phenomenologically it is at the transition between the personal experience of the observable and the abstract concept of the ‘social’ which is far removed from the pupils’ experience.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The framework of the present study of this ACR’s curricular experimentation corresponded to a qualitative paradigm, specifically to that of action research. From its beginnings, action research has sought to support teachers’ experimentation with how best to approach the problem of

secondary school pupils’ lack of motivation. Within this general framework, the theoretical approach taken was that of the IRES perspective. In this, the teacher-researcher connects reflection on school-level knowledge with reflection on professional knowledge, considering the pupils’ curriculum and the teacher’s curriculum holistically (Porlán & Rivero, 1998; García Pérez, 2000 and 2006).

The problems set out for research were: what learning processes occur in the pupils when the class is working with an ACR on conflict and coexistence? What professional development processes occur in the teacher when the class is working with an ACR on conflict and coexistence? What conception does the school as a culture have of coexistence and how does it influence the pupils’ learning and the teacher’s professional development? The whole-class group was divided into 6 focus groups. One of them, labelled G3, was taken as the sample for analysis of its production.

With regard to the data acquisition sources, techniques and tools, the dynamics and interactions in the classroom were observed and recorded through the pupils’ class notebooks, audio recordings of one of the focus groups (G3) and the Researcher’s Diary. In the data analysis, the three teaching units experimented with in the classroom were considered to be separate methodological moments (UI, U2, U3). Within each teaching unit, a number of activities were selected that were considered to have the potential to yield information that would be relevant to the investigation. For the third problem –that concerning the concept of coexistence in the school’s culture and its influence on the processes of the pupil’s learning and the teacher’s professional development– the data sources used were the school’s curricular and organizational documents and the Researcher’s Diary. This latter was used as a record of the observations made by the participants in the different meetings of the school’s various commissions, departmental meetings, etc.

A system of categories was applied to organize and code the data. To each category, one of three values could be assigned according to the evolution of the complexity of the concepts. In the IRES project, we denote this the ‘progression hypothesis’ (García Díaz, 1998; García Pérez & Porlán, 2000). The 2903 units of information that resulted from the coding were processed with the Atlas-Ti program.

The pupils’ learning was represented by three categories: Learning in the Conceptual Dimension (LCD), Learning in the Attitudinal Dimension (LAD) and Learning in the Procedural Dimension (LPD).

For the teachers, the evolution in their professional development was also represented by three categories: Progression of their conception of school-level Knowledge (PK), Progression of their understanding and application of the Teaching Model of working with problems (PTM) and Progression of their commitment to Social Problems and their resolution as an integrative part of their professional identity (PSP). This category system did not follow exactly a hypothesis of progression with pre-determined values, although we observed and recorded changes in the aforementioned categories to give a response to the second research question – that relating to the teachers' professional development.

The information from the written documents and audio transcripts was processed according to the techniques of 'Content Analysis' (Bardin, 1986), converting it into units of information that were coded according to the above category system. This procedure consisted of three levels of analysis:

- 1) A first level of synchronic analysis describing the population of procedural skills, concepts and attitudes for the three values of the hypothesis of progression.
- 2) A second level of longitudinal quantitative analysis in which the data were subjected to statistical analysis to determine which progressions, regressions and stagnations had occurred in the course of the intervention's three teaching units.
- 3) A third level of analysis of the focus group interactions. The aim was to examine micro-processes which might provide clues about the logic of the progressions and the roles played in them by emotional blocks, protagonism, withdrawal and inhibition, the empowerment that makes participation possible, the fear of disagreement and of taboo subjects, etc. A further objective was to inquire into the importance of certain key ideas that energized the discussions, such as the question of generational conflict and pupils' rights.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Changes in the pupils' learning

The research showed that, despite the constrictive nature of beliefs about coexistence and the influence of the school's culture, those beliefs can be restructured when working with a methodology and content that makes sense for the pupils and which recognizes their needs and interests. The population of the pupils' predominant ideas and attitudes at the start of the intervention was at the value 1 of the progression hypothesis, corresponding

to a low level of complexity. They represent a stereotyped imaginary characterized by a strong emotional load, making reflection difficult. When it comes to explaining conflictive situations, the immediately perceptible contingencies overshadow the primary role played by individuals. Thus, for example:

We have an incident in which some people have been blamed simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This makes it very difficult to set out a position favourable to conflict management since the prevailing attitudes are those of avoidance or repression and they are taken as ways to 'resolve' the conflict. Other characteristics that we observed were the personalization and naturalization of social phenomena, both aspects that have repeatedly been cited in the literature (Lenzi & Castorina, 1999/2000, 210-21; Lenzi, 2001; Kohen, 2005).

Regarding procedural skills related to working with problems, there predominate the formulation of research problems based on irrelevant or anecdotal cases and a conception of planning as mere searching for data. Also, a consequence of the inability to debate and to construct arguments is simple additive work in the focus group, repeating what had been written previously without any attempt at contrast or interaction. With respect to the reflection on conflict management in school and its influence on learning processes, notice is taken only of what is perceptible and obvious, and complaints are voiced about various deficiencies.

Conceptual and attitudinal progression occurs when the causes of conflict begin to be linked to people and this permits a clearer attitudinal disposition towards positive conflict management. The causal connection also allows conflict to be thought of as a process, leading to the concept of 'escalation' of the conflict, with a configuration of multiple causality and the interaction of various factors. Linear causality passes over to multiple causality and at times there is an intimation of an interactive process between causes and consequences. A tolerant attitude towards conflict and discrepancy passes over to a standpoint of 'learning from conflict' as part of the social commitment to learn from experiences.

With respect to the performance of social roles, progression involves the passage from a deterministic conception in which the role is identified with the position held in an organization, to a possibilistic conception in which different styles are possible in the performance of a social role or function. Progression continues with

the complex characterization of the types of leadership and their social consequences, as well as with a dialectical conception of power relationships. This is seen in the following example, in which four pupils of Group 3 interact:

G3S4: There would be no teachers because there would be no pupils

G3S2: Without teachers there is no country

G3S3: Without us there are no teachers

G3S1: What I think is that it is not necessary to have a leader or anything, I think that they are organizing things well as they are and I think that this will go forward.

With regard to the progression of learning in the procedural dimension, the research problems take on a greater degree of abstraction and generalization and begin to give play to the initiation of a true process of research. The planning includes various stages and tasks, from initial hypotheses to final conclusions. In the reflection on the learning process, a more complex analysis of the discourses was observed. This analysis took into account both the manifest and the latent planes and passed from complaining to claiming rights.

### Interactions in the focus group discussions

We observed a compulsive tendency to unanimity and a flight from discrepancy. The teacher's attempts to animate the debate clashed with the confirmatory bias of the pupils' ideas and attitudes. Insistence with the instruction to try to debate was unsuccessful. However, when the teacher adopted a more deconstructive style, cutting off the imaginary of repetitions and inviting expression of ideas and interaction of opinions, this led to a slip of the chain of meanings and made it possible for small conceptual and attitudinal links to be formed in the pupils' construction of their own discourse. Thus:

T: Aha! So it is the teacher who must resolve the conflict, not those involved in the conflict?

G3S1: The one who has more (...) more (...) the one who has to give the orders there is the teacher (...) and we have always been told here to go to the teacher whenever we have a conflict (...)

T: Is that what we have been told here, or is it what we think is the best? (...) [Silence]

T: That's what we have been told here, but what do you all think? Here, just between ourselves, without anyone else finding out

G3S4: We could do it here, between ourselves, couldn't we? Fran and Carmen (...)."

T: Might the teacher have a different part to play there, to resolve it?

G3S5: As a mediator

T: So what should he do as a mediator?

G3S2: Make everyone see everyone's points of view, so that everyone understands each other

T: And that's what he does there?

G3S1: He tells people to shut up.

When they did the case study on generational conflict in the school and the question of the rights of pupils, they went from conformity and emotional blockage when faced with the taboo subject to giving vent to their feelings through complaining. This in no way meant a progression. Nevertheless, although apparently a regression, it seemed to be a necessary stage for the release of the blockage and to allow ideas to circulate.

G3S1: But for that some people have spoken up, that they were not to blame

G3S2: I think that they [the teachers] don't care what you say to them, it goes in one ear and out of the other, you say something to them and they say, aha, it was you lot, and now you can all shut up (...)

G3S1: Yes, but they have to have proof

G3S2: Then, what do we say? That we agree that it was them but they have no proof to accuse them?

G3S1, G3S4: They have no proof to accuse them.

From a more complex and critical form of thinking about injustice and the demand for rights in school, the intervention went on to the analysis of a hot topic in Spain: the crisis of the system and the '15-M' citizen protest movements. For example:

G3S4: They are not breaking any law

G3S1: That's the corruption of the system, that's corruption of police with politicians

G3S1: Because the politicians want to forcibly remove these people and all they want is to defend their rights (...).

This led us to postulate that generational conflict, as a specific form for young people to experience power relationships, is a prerequisite for their more complex and critical understanding of social conflicts. In this sense, the research shows a transfer of cognitive and attitudinal schemes from the scale of interpersonal conflict, specifically of conflict with adults at school, to the scale of social conflict.

### **The teacher's professional development**

In the initial state, it was observed that, as a device for innovation, the process of designing the activities clashed with the unconscious inertia coming from thinking about encompassing 'the entire syllabus'. The conception of school-level knowledge showed itself to be an obstacle to professional development. Even though the resources were new and varied, and methodological change was tolerated, the teacher's professional identity based on possession of a specialist's knowledge operated as a barrier. Nonetheless, the teacher sensed that, by itself, the design of activities was not going to change things in practice. Progression involved comprehension of the clash of cultures and generational conflict in the classroom, since the conception of school-level knowledge was linked to possession of a body of knowledge on which the teacher's status and position of power depended.

### **The conception of coexistence in the school's culture**

Despite (or perhaps because of) the Daedalian labyrinth of plans and projects, and notwithstanding the efforts made by the teaching and school administrative staff involved, failure was clearly observable. And while change was set as the keynote of the intervention and calls were

made for teachers to try out other methodologies, it was not realized how complex the process really is. The divorce between the official conception of coexistence in the school's culture and the real conception was evident. Predominant in this real conception were prohibitions, surveillance, control and punishment designed to avoid the possibility of conflictive interactions, thereby limiting stimuli and impoverishing the school's life and learning opportunities.

The various organizational measures and the different organs and instruments of the intervention involved very few people and clashed with the majority conception of coexistence present in the school's culture. The result was bureaucratization and the loss of meaning, since all the new words were simply being used to describe old things. The Coexistence Commission focused practically exclusively on applying corrections. The Coexistence Classroom became the place of punishment and indeed served as an attempt to relieve teachers of some of the problems represented by what were called 'disruptive' pupils. And the participation of both families and pupils was conceived of as mere consent.

In general, a strong parallel was observed between the conceptions of coexistence that the pupils held in their initial situation and that which was part of the school's culture. This would seem to be indicative of the limiting nature of many social representations in this matter. The conclusion to be drawn from the study is that an approach like the present one to coexistence through plans and projects will not permeate a school's culture. In the present case, its influence was found to be superficial, affecting only a few people, and clashing in its assumptions with the mainstream culture of the profession. Coexistence was seen as a prerequisite for the fulfilment of the academic syllabus, but, paradoxically, the conditions and requirements of this syllabus did not exactly contribute to improving that coexistence. In contrast, the proposal described here was to integrate coexistence into the curriculum, elevating it to an object of study in the social sciences class of the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education.

### **NOTES**

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<sup>2</sup> The New General Urban Plan of Seville, 2010: [http://www.sevilla.org/plandesevilla/ade/def/doc/AD\\_I\\_08\\_4.pdf](http://www.sevilla.org/plandesevilla/ade/def/doc/AD_I_08_4.pdf)

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