

Intervention on school culture through strategic partnership

-comparative analysis on bullying and cyberbullying in school-

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School culture

School culture comprise tangible thing and intangible things that is why is hard to explain it and has many definitions and understandings in specialized literature. From terms like *informal organization* or *school climate*, which are often understood as school culture, evolved the concept of school culture. Culture is the stream of “norms, beliefs, values, traditions, and rituals build up over time” (Peterson 1998). School culture is a sum of tacit expectations and assumption that guide the actions of teachers, students and other staff.

The presence in every school of a school culture is visible often, whenever someone states *That is how thing are done at this school* without having a written rule, document, or policy to show. Every school has its own culture and in many situations, this culture does not move school, as an organization, in the desired direction. In these cases, school culture is wrongly considered to be missing.

Erikson (1987) defined school culture as “a system of ordinary, taken for granted meanings and symbols with both implicit and explicit content, that is deliberately and non-deliberately, learned and shared among members of naturally bounded social groups”.

The school culture create a work context in which all participants (students, teachers, and other staff) perform their daily activities respecting beliefs, norms, values (written or unwritten), traditions, and symbols, but the school culture results from individual and collective perception of the school’s social environment, beliefs, attitudes, norms behaviour of the members of the community. This is another aspect, which made the concept hard to be understood.

The school cultures are characterized as weak or strong cultures but also as positive or negative cultures, depending what criteria is used in the evaluations.

The elements that characterize a school culture are different from an author to another.

The dimensions used to evaluate a school culture are not uniform and are connected with the purpose of evaluation. For instance, Angus & al analysing the effect of school culture on students achievement consider 10 dimension: goal focus, communication, power equalization, resources utilization, cohesiveness, morale, innovativeness, autonomy, adaptation, problem solving.

On the other hand, the vision of Denver Commission on secondary School reform about cultural elements, which describes a school culture, are:

- An inspiring vision backed by a clear mission,
- A curriculum, modes of instruction, assessment and learning opportunities linked to the vision and mission,
- Time for students and teachers to do their work,
- Focus on student and teachers learning,
- Many opportunities and venues for creating the culture,
- Leadership,
- Data-driven decision making systems,
- Support from parents,
- District flexibility and support. (Brown, 2004)

In relation with the capacity for a school to adapt to changes in educational politics and new demands or need of students, for evaluation of school culture are used 6 dimensions: professional values, emphasis on learning, collegiality, collaboration, shared planning, transformational leaders (Cavanagh, 1998). The balance between all these elements will demonstrate a strong school culture. Weaknesses of one or more dimensions could be overcome by interventions in school culture.

“Effective schools improvements requires the target of improvement initiatives to be the culture in itself and improvement process to be based upon cultural interventions.” (Cavanagh, 1998)

”A positive transformation in school culture implies strategies to increase participation in collaboration, promote collegiality and shared planning.” (Idem)

Intervention in school through educative projects, such as Erasmus+ Strategic partnerships for schools, which targets elements of culture have ramifications in school culture. These projects represent an opportunity for improving the culture.

A strategic partnership for improving school culture

This study was conducted based on feed-back received from the participants in an Erasmus+ Project ”I Am not a Target!”. The project started in 2018, and the data was collected after a year of interventions in all the six schools part of the strategic partnership. The project targeted besides the development of socio-emotional competences, building the skills and attitudes requested for building resilience, managing emotions, on „promoting a supportive

organizational culture of the imperfect peace, kindness and carrying, coexistence in diversity. The specific objectives of the project are:

- *Fostering the sense of belonging to a collaborative community of diversity, inclusion and peace*
- *Enhancing the potential for building peace in a intercultural community*
- *Development of capacity of dealing with perspective of conflicts and imperfect peace coexistence (transforming the reality into peaceful, inclusive, integrative and carrying conditions).*

This project is tackling directly three of the six dimensions identified by Cavanagh, emphasis on learning, collegiality, and collaboration.

The method used to evaluate the impact on the school culture of this project is a qualitative one. The instrument used to gather the data is the interview, applied to three categories of beneficiaries (stakeholders) of the project: students who participated in transnational learning sessions, teachers who were involved in the activities of the project and the students' parents.

Data from the interviews were supplemented with field observation carried out during transnational learning and during the activities of the project

Four major elements were isolated and analysed: inclusion, relationships, sense of belonging and potential of building a community of coexistence in peace

Inclusion

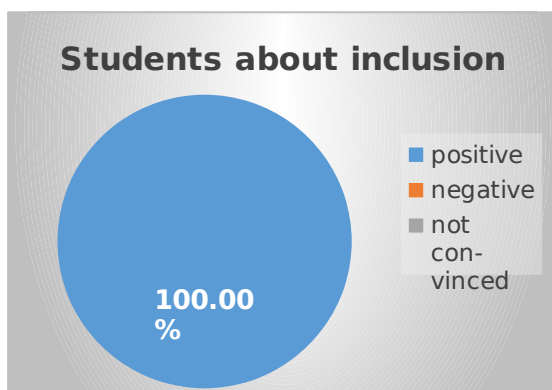
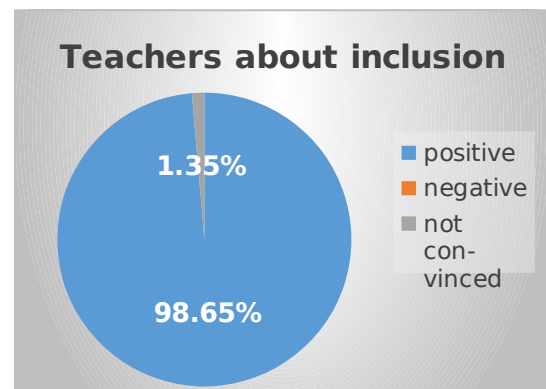
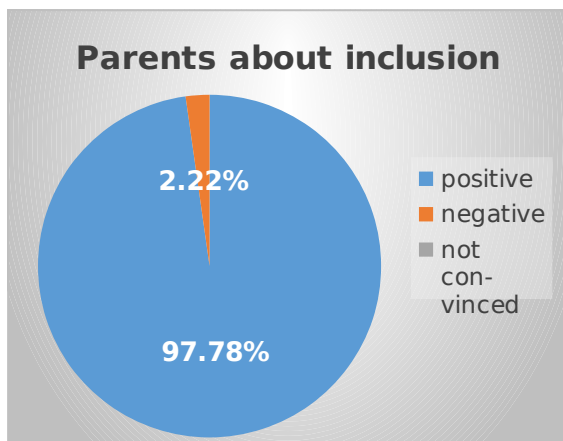
The stakeholders were asked about „development of socio-emotional skills necessary for the development of better inclusion”.

The respondents mention some socio-emotional skills, which were developed during the project, such as: empathy, equity, vulnerability, expressing regrets, confidence, kindness. Here are some examples.

- *managing the emotions and feelings of the students and promoting their self-esteem and empathy, creates a better environment for inclusion.*
- *adopting the same roles and the same responsibilities as their peers, showing the naturalness, the equity and the inclusion of all types of students in this project*
- *helped us detect those students with situations of greater vulnerability*
- *I manage to understand deeply the differences between people and through that what to expect from people*
- *We all had the chance to communicate better, to reflect on the messages we send or not, to adapt our speech so that it is as clear as possible (I refer on the activity with post-it positive notes, as well as to the activity about expressing regrets).*
- *I have also learn to work efficiently in teams.*
- *I had the opportunity to meet new people, learn about new cultures and different ideas, share emotions and worries, learn about school situations in other countries*

and face different behaviours. All of these experiences improved the ability to coexist with other people

- *I can understand better, when my friends are facing problems or they are sad. I became more kind and I am trying to help more and act with kindness*
- *It also helped me develop the ability of facing unfavourable situations by being part of a group of students with minimum English knowledge. The fact that I had to find a way to communicate with them it was a challenge for me, but I'm happy that I found a way to face an unfavourable situation.*
- *I truly believe that this project contributed to improving socio-emotional skills through facing our fears of not being understood or not fitting in the community. Talking with people with wonderful stories helped us be more emphatic.*
- *I know better how to manage unfavorable situations because I am more patient with the others and I don't think just at myself, making the other people feelings my priority too.*

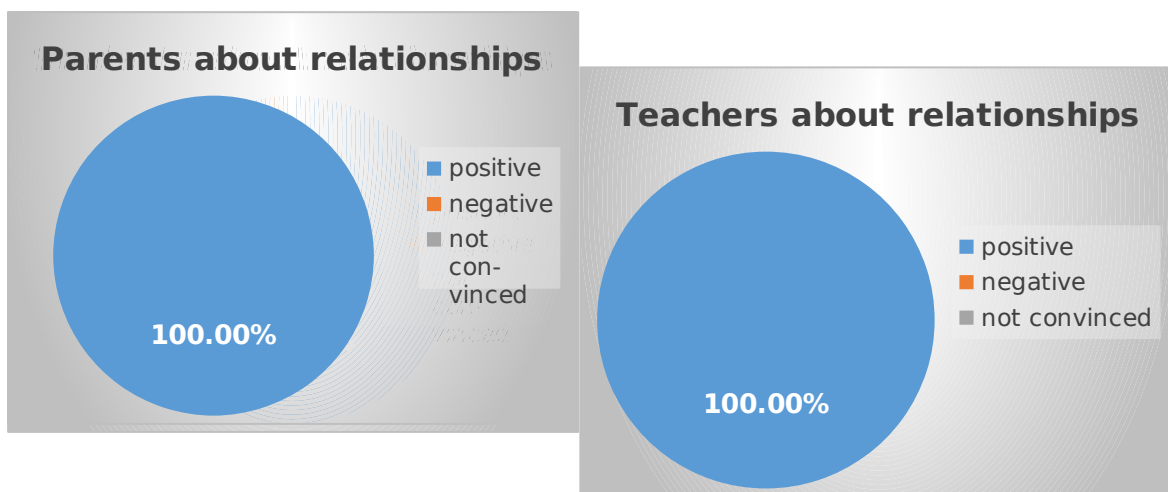


Relationships

Relationships in a school are defined as "the proper way for individuals to relate to each other in order to make the group safe and comfortable"(Schein, 1985). In this respect, relationships

are better build through non-formal and informal activities carried out within educational projects, extracurricular activities because the power distance between students and teachers is reduced and collaborative relationships are developed. Students', parents' and teachers' perceptions about building strong relationships throughout the project in positive.

- *It allowed the sharing of ideas and activities between colleagues from different years, school and education levels, with a view to a common goal,*
- *Through activities such as “Positive post-it Day”, “Sorry file Day” we have improved the relationship between colleagues, we manage to focus on the positive aspects of each person and we see that in each of them there are good things. I can help my friends when they have difficulties*
- *I think I have developed communicative and collaborative skills with my classmates.*
- *I tried to improve my behaviour towards the others*
- *I’ve managed to improve significantly anger management issues that would appear in relationships with other people. Moreover, I’ve developed my empathy which led to an increase in the attention I put in other people’s emotional needs.*



Sense of belonging and Potential to build a community of coexistence in peace

Sense of belonging is "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of the system of environment." (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). It involve the feeling and beliefs and expectation of individuals to fits in a group, to find acceptance and to sacrifice for the group.

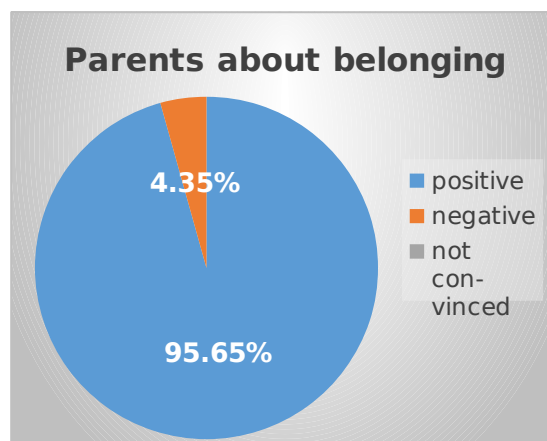
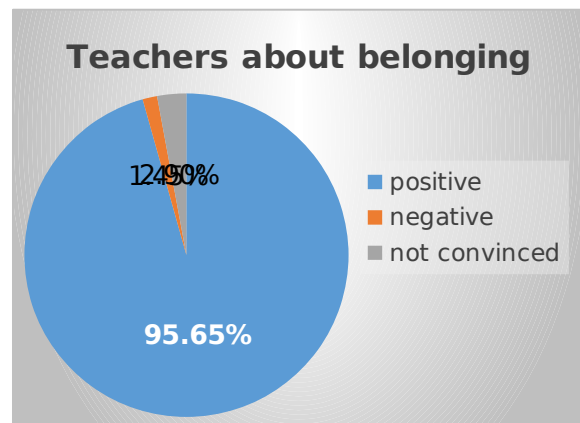
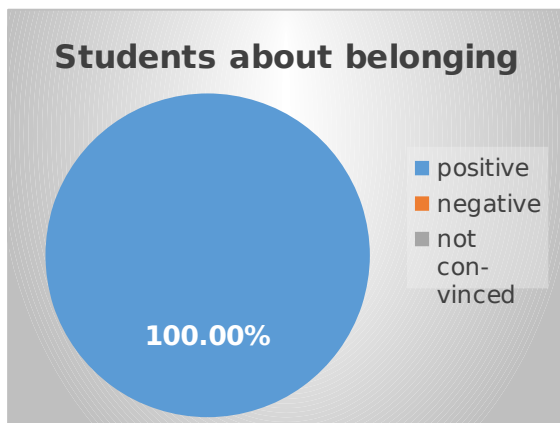
Once that the feeling of belonging is cleared, the community is build easily.

Regarding the perception of belonging and coexistence in peace after project activities, the participants declared:

- *through activities such as “Positive post-it Day”, “Sorry file Day” we have improved the relationship between colleagues, we manage to focus on the positive aspects of each person and we see that in each of them there are good things. This approach aimed at vulnerable children enables the child to develop his or her socio-emotional skills by developing problem solving skills in a safe and respectful manner, thus encouraging cooperation, communication, developing self-organizing skills and in particular to hold them accountable.*
- *In the aspect of being supportive of each other.*
- *My participation in the project-built self-confidence and peaceful character.*
- *Yes, I try to be kind even with people I don't like*
- *I feel that since I started to participate in this project I promoted the feeling of belonging in a community of diversity inclusion and peace, one of the main reasons being that I became part of an amazing group of people, with different opinions and ideas that made me change my perspective on a lot of things.*
- *with the participation in the Project I promoted the feeling of belonging to a collaborative community of diversity, inclusion and peace. Throughout the team-working activities of this project, I felt that the community in which I was one full of diversity and inclusive people, fact that developed my inclusive behaviour and collaborating skills.*
- *it corroborated everything I always felt and read about. More and more I consider that emotional intelligence and the focus on socio-emotional learning and its development, contribute to the school not only being a space for formal intellectual learning but also, a space where one is with joy, pleasure and mutual help. A space where one learns to be and to live with others in harmony, consensus and also in healthy discussion and confrontation of ideas.*
- *A school is only a school if there is sharing, partnership and collaboration from all the professionals who work there. During the course of this project, all the agents involved in it discussed, opined, shared and confronted ideas always with the objective of promoting equality among all, respect for the other and the valorisation of oneself in an environment without conflicts.*
- *By participating in this project, I had the opportunity to be part of a group consisting of different people from different countries, with different background, ideas, experiences, lifestyle but at the same time, having similar goals, feelings and expectations*
- *By working activities aimed at developing empathy, students begin to better understand each other's feelings, in this way the aggressions are reduced. Because they better understand the damage they can cause to others.- By*

meeting students from other countries and cultures in such a positive situation, bonds and relationships develop that lead them to improve and open up to those who are different.-

- I would highlight all the activities that promoted team working, because they gave us all the opportunity to cooperate, despite our differences
- we had to work in teams consisting of students from every country. I personally believe that everything from working together to complete all assignments and sharing ideas to agreeing most of the time and diplomatically resolving misunderstandings, brought us closer and created a feeling of inclusion.
- Because I worked with so many people in this project, now I know that we are all equal .I worked with a variety of people and I understand that our race, religion and age do not define us as people, but our behavior with the other does. I was surprised to see that even the little ones can do a very good job.

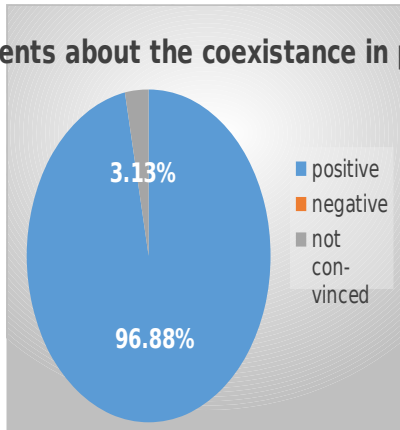


- If we want an inclusive school, we really have to accept everyone's differences
- this project has allowed us to consciously increase and develop attitudes of acceptance of the other, to fight against prejudice and against social exclusion. For example: when together with all students we discuss themes about the acceptance of differences, when we encourage cordiality between peers, when children with disabilities participate in all the proposed activities,

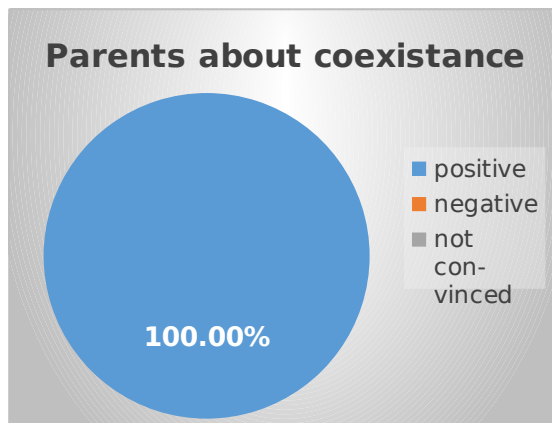
when we request the collaboration of the surrounding community, when we receive people and children from other countries,

- *By participating in this project, activities and moments were developed in which the entire school community and the surrounding community actively participated without conflict and always respecting cultural, ethnic, social, religious differences, etc. For example: mobility between countries, school activities in which all classes participated (flash mob, exhibitions, clarification sessions and other festivities related to values).*
- *I have always been a person who has constantly tried to solve conflicts and build peace in intercultural communities and not only. Having had contact with people who were 'different' made me be more open-minded and sympathetic towards their needs and this project was the perfect opportunity to remind me of how important it is to create a safe environment for all students at school and outside the school premises.*
- *. It is clear that by participating in this project, I further increased my capacity to create peaceful, inclusive, integrative and solidary conditions*
- *This project helped us all to understand the values of dialogue, cooperation and inclusion, despite of our differences. All these values are necessary for the building of a new world*
- *I can solve conflicts with my friends better and I try to make peace with others when they are mean to me.*
- *The project helped us to accept the others as they are ,and they do accept us as we are then there will be no conflict contributing to the positive transformation of reality .With that in mind we do achieve solidarity among the participants as well*
- *Within the class I belong to, there are problems related to both school and age, situations that I managed to manage due to some ideas that I found in the program.*
- *After this project, I felt that I am more patient with the others. I think that this is my major problem; I get bored when somebody is talking too much and I feel angry when my opinion is not listened by the others. But I finally realized that I should not act that impulsive all the time because if the others would do that to me, I would probably feel upset.*

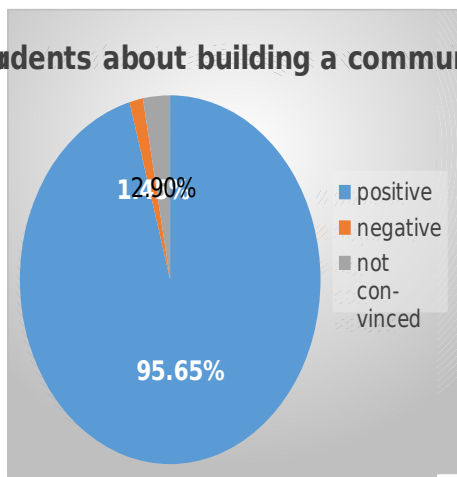
Students about the coexistence in peace



Parents about coexistence



Students about building a community



Positive school culture is the foundation of learning environment and has an important role in creating the conditions for teaching and learning to occur within the schools. The extracurricular actions, whether they are international projects or unique activities are paramount important for the building positive school culture besides their declared objective. Through non-formal methods,

regardless of primary objectives the benefits extend to the building strong relationships, positive perception of the sense of belonging and collaboration for shared goals.

Hagerty, B. M. K., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, K., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 6, 172–177.

Peterson, K.D., Deal T.E. How Leaders Influence the Culture of Schools, in *Educational Leadership*, no 1, volume 56, 1998

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