

# TOGETHERNESS, COEXISTENCE OR CONFRONTATION – THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE ON PEER-TO-PEER SOCIAL RELATIONS IN CATALONIA, SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – *This paper presents some of the results of the study ‘Coexistence and Confrontation among Peers in Secondary Schools in Catalonia’ commissioned by the Ombudsman’s Office of the Catalan government and carried out at the Institute of Childhood and the Urban World (CIIMU) in Barcelona, Spain, in 2005-2006. It offers a description of the indicators of malaise and exclusion among students at nine public and private secondary schools serving varying social environments in Catalonia. Qualitative and quantitative techniques were applied, based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, parents associations and school management, and a questionnaire for students in Year 1 and Year 4 of secondary school (ages 12 and 16). Though the results obtained also reveal a certain amount of verbal, social and physical bullying in these schools, this study’s main interest was the factors constituting each school’s climate as it affected student peer-to-peer relationships. Such factors included the type of ‘model’ student promoted by the school; the values governing social popularity and stigmatisation among the students; the sorts of academic expectations placed on students by the school; the perception of teaching methods and practices among students; the social relationship between teachers and students as perceived by the latter; the different models of governance through rules and the level of internal coherence in applying sanctions; the strategies used by the school to create groups; and the degree of recognition by the institution of the diversity of students’ origins.*

## **Theoretical focus: beyond bullying**

**I**n 2004, the Ombudsman’s Office of the Catalan government started to receive increasing numbers of complaints about peer bullying in the secondary school context, after the striking news of the suicide of a teenage student that later has come to be known as ‘the Jokin case’<sup>2</sup>. As a result, in 2005 the Office commissioned the Institute of Childhood and Urban World (CIIMU)<sup>3</sup> to carry out an in-depth study into how school climates might be affecting relationships of

coexistence in local secondary schools and thus having a negative impact on the wellbeing of students.

Rather than following a psycho-pedagogical approach that is characteristic of most of the classic studies on bullying and school climate, the study was carried out from a socio-anthropological perspective, although the contributions of previous literature, regardless of disciplinary perspectives, were carefully taken into account. Priority was given to looking at practices and relationships among students and school institutions from a holistic point of view, focusing on student agency in social interactions with and within the school. We therefore regarded gender, social class, ethnic/national origin and language<sup>4</sup> not only as independent variables but also as elements of processes that are constructed and (re)produced in the school as well as in peer relationships. The (re)creation of femininity and masculinity, social distancing and cultural/ethno-racial/national and linguistic hierarchies are interwoven in the processes of identity-building and also through social relations. In particular, our approach draws heavily on Bourdieu's notion of different forms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and Ross Epp's notion of systematic violence (Ross Epp, 1999), a kind of inherent institutional 'violence' that favours exclusion, malaise and inequality of power in the heart of schools. Our main objective was to identify the factors and processes in schools that students perceive as being of key importance in their relationships of conviviality/coexistence, as opposed to the information provided by adult agents in the same institutional space.

## Schools and peer relationships

*Exclusion in school: bad for many, good for some?*

Ethnographic research in schools has shown how the institution of the school itself creates the conditions for violence and opposition among peers. Through the structure and the order within that structure is created what Payet (1997, p. 177) has called 'logical institutional discrimination', a hierarchical mapping on the school structure itself<sup>5</sup> which favours the creation of groups of winners and losers according to the different levels of prestige they enjoy. Involuntarily, this also favours the emergence a system of 'systematic violence' for which nobody feels responsible but which has the effect of excluding some sectors of students (Ross Epp, 1999).

'Systematic violence is found in any *institutionalised practice that affects students unfavourably*. In order to be damaging, the practices do not need to produce a negative effect in all students. They may be beneficial for some and damaging to others.' (Ross Epp, 1999, p. 18; italics in original)

Hallinan & Williams (1989) have shown the influence of certain factors on the organisation of schools when it comes to developing interethnic friendships, such as the presence or absence of groups separated according to performance, the balanced presence of children of different origins in the same class or the use of teaching methods based on public exposure of students in their evaluation. But the school as an institution can produce class, ethnic and sexual segregation in spite of an apparent discourse of equal opportunity (Oakes, 1987; Payet, 1997). In Catalonia, previous research has also shown how the kinds of discourses circulating among the different agents in relation to ethnicity and performance in the school affect the level of racism present in interethnic relations (Serra, 2001; Pàmies, 2008).

### *Segregation and violence: when does resistance emerge?*

Academic segregation of the students and their consequent social isolation within the school increases school violence, as has been shown by research carried out in France: ‘...the feeling of violence and the climate of anti-social behaviour grows according to the increase in “internal” and social exclusion experienced by its students’ (Debarbieux, Dupoux & Montoya, 1997, p. 35).

Success in positive coexistence and bonding between students and the school depends on how this tension between differentiating and equalising mechanisms is resolved (Araos & Correa, 2004). Some British studies (Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975) show that the values and norms transmitted in low academic ability groups (constructed as ‘bad’) contribute to the crisis of oppositional sub-cultures among young people. The working class sub-culture of ‘mates’ among young people (Willis, 1977) is constructed in resistance to the school culture and this implies hostility toward more conformist, less ‘masculine’, minority and female students. Student groups are constructed ‘against’ the others, thanks to a firm separation between ability-level groups as well as daily practices in the school (Eckert, 1989; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005). Moreover, the de-legitimisation of working class culture (Feito, 1990), the emphasis on body control and behaviour and the repetitive teaching methods in working class schools (Fernández-Enguita, 1997) also encourage resistance among students.

### *Hidden violence: organize, separate, teach*

Violence is latent in school processes and structures, between power relationships in the institution and in relation to the teachers’ authority (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and sometimes it only becomes evident in certain acts which in themselves are unmistakable distress calls, such as depressions, suicide attempts or blatant aggression:

‘Violence corresponds to the unsought-after part of internal processes of discrimination, remaining hidden or unnoticed (what has been called systematic violence), unless it takes the form of victimising actions that are unavoidable in school self-observation ...’ (Araos & Correa, 2004)

Bureaucratic organisation and disciplinary techniques (such as isolation, sorting of students) provoke feelings of being different and alienation in young people from minority groups as a result of cultural distancing and a lack of power (Davidson, 1996), which in turn affects the formation of their identity and social relationships. On the other hand, on the specific subject of bullying, factors such as the stress induced by high levels of academic competition, a decline in confidence in education as a means to social betterment, the authoritarian styles of teachers, strict hierarchies in school, harsh tools of discipline and weak teaching skills have revealed themselves to be key in the growth of this phenomenon in Japan (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003).

### *School climates and bullying*

Moos (1979) defines school climate as a learning environment which involves both the categories of personal growth among students and the school’s system for maintenance or change, which includes order and clarity in the rules of conduct. Taking all this research as a starting point, our own definition takes ‘school climate’ to have four dimensions:

- An institutional dimension, which includes elements ranging from the public image projected/attributed to the school, to the system of rules and how diversity is approached.
- A teaching dimension, including academic expectations, teaching methods and school rituals.
- A participatory dimension, which considers the extent of real participation of students in the classroom and school.
- A relational/social dimension, which includes elements like social popularity among students, the profile of the ‘ideal’ student, friendships, conflicts and relationships of abuse and intimidation.

It has to be noticed that bullying itself remains an important interest, in spite of our focus on school climate that we would regard as an important part of previous conditions for its emergence or development. We understand bullying as the type of situations where a student is repeatedly exposed to negative actions by one or several of their peers, as originally defined by Olweus (1993) and adopted

later by Del Barrio et al. (2003). We are talking about reiterated actions that reveal intention and inequality of power between individual students. However, like Pellegrini (2002), we also consider bullying a deliberate strategy for achieving status among classmates that has to do with systems of stratification at school and the way social relations are understood.

Previous research in Spain that has focused on coexistence in the school context and on peer bullying can be fundamentally grouped into the following categories:

- Measuring the extent of peer bullying (Bisquerra & Martínez, 1998; Mora-Merchán et al., 2001; Del Barrio et al., 2003; Oñederra, 2004; Serrano Sarmiento & Iborra Marmolejo, 2005; Defensor del Pueblo, 2006).
- Analysing aggression among peers in relation to juvenile subcultures (Martínez & Rovira, 2001).
- Exploring the relations of coexistence in schools and families (Martín, Rodríguez & Marchesi, 2003) – one of the few that identifies school climate as an independent dimension.

Therefore, beyond a narrow focus on bullying, our study intended to answer the following questions, as a guide to orientate our *reconstruction of the conditions created by different school climates from the perceptions and experiences of students* (Sindic de Greuges, 2006; Carrasco et al., 2007; Pongerrada & Carrasco, 2008):

- What factors of social, ethnic and gender stratification affect the hierarchies and peer relationships in the school environment?
- What school processes emerge as factors of exclusion and malaise and have the capacity to affect identities and relationship styles among young people?
- What peer groups emerge in the school schools, what characteristics do they have (class, gender, ethnic origin, group values, social and academic status) and what kind of relationships do they have with one another?

## **Methodology and sample**

In parallel to a review of the literature on peer relations in schools, and following a methodological orientation inspired by grounded theory, we organised three focus groups of students from different social, academic and neighbourhood backgrounds with the aim of incorporating their perceptions into the research instruments we intended to apply, namely questionnaires and guided interviews.

The fieldwork was carried out in nine secondary schools in different areas of Catalonia. We collected data from students in their initial and final years of compulsory secondary education (known locally as ESO<sup>6</sup>), their teachers and

their schools' management teams. The selection of schools was made with the cooperation of a special unit at the Catalan government's Department of Education that is devoted to preventing, responding to and mediating in situations of conflict or maltreatment among members of a particular school community (USCE<sup>7</sup>). The nine secondary schools were selected to represent different types of realities in terms of private/public ownership and management of the school; socio-economic status of students; location; proportion of immigrant students; and the availability of specific strategies for the promotion of good relations and/or mediation programmes, that is, whether a particular school had an official or unofficial culture of conflict resolution.

Different types of data were obtained for each school under study. The team started by obtaining and analysing information about the school and its educational goals, rules and norms. Next, statistical data were gathered about the students according to sex and ethnic/geographic origin, as well as the number of disciplinary sanctions they had received, and their cause and resolution. Websites, journals and documents on discipline and conflict resolution were also consulted. Guided interviews were also carried out with members of each school's management team (i.e., the head teacher and head of studies), the school's educational psychologists, members of the Parents' Association, Year 1 and Year 4 programme coordinators in all nine schools, and Year 1 and Year 4 students in a smaller subset of five schools. The students to be interviewed were selected with the help of the coordinators and class tutors<sup>8</sup>. Different students were selected from each class according to their relative positions in terms of peer leadership in the context of the classroom and the school (in other words, we selected some students who ranked highly as peer leaders and some who had low rank). Finally, a questionnaire was administered to the full set of students from all nine schools ( $N = 1,197$ ). Each researcher personally visited the schools assigned until all the interviews were completed and the documents and statistical data were collected. The same team personally handed out the questionnaires to students and collected ethnographic data during pre-questionnaire visits and while the questionnaires were being completed.

## Findings

### *Status, expectations and methods: 'This school is crap'*

Our questionnaires showed that 61.6% of students in the sample had between 'some' and 'a lot of' confidence in the school. Significantly, however, 34.8% reported that they had 'no' or 'little' confidence – a proportion of low confidence that was reflected throughout the four years of ESO. In relation to the academic

dimension, 44.1% of students were of the opinion that the school thought of them as a 'normal student' and 29.4% as a 'good student'. The qualitative analysis of our data showed that one of the factors with the most positive influence on relationships of coexistence are the high expectations placed on students and the positive image projected on students by teachers, as transmitted through teachers' discourse and practice in the daily life of the school. Competitiveness and high academic demands, contrary to what was expected, did not appear to be conditions that favoured conflict. What had a negative impact, rather, were the low expectations and/or negative views that the teachers had of their students, as indeed the students had of themselves. It even emerged that some schools view themselves as 'dead ends', in a hopeless situation because of the socio-economic level of their catchment area, where the operating agents appear generally to have given up. In those schools, desperation feeds feelings of malaise among students, which does not necessarily indicate that they treat students any worse, but points to a general disheartening and undignified social and school atmosphere. In these schools, students make greater demands to be 'respected' (34.7% compared with 22% in 'high' prestige schools) and perceive low expectations on the part of the school and negative labelling by the educational community:

R: *What do the people in the neighbourhood say about this school?*

S1: *About [name of school] they say a lot of bad things...*

S2: *They say it's crap, and they say it, too, about all the rest [of schools in the neighbourhood].*

R: *They say it about [name of school]?*

S1: *Yes.*

S2: *And they say to us, are you going to go to [name of school]? It's bloody awful!*

(R – researcher, S1 – male student, S2 – female student, Year 4, School 5)

The students state that conflicts and insults arise more easily when they are bored in the classroom and cannot see the sense in what they are doing. This boredom in the classroom, with repetitive methods and students' skills left unchallenged, ultimately constitutes institutional violence.

*'The intentional exposure to boredom and repetition is one part, but only a small part, of everything that is systematically violent in our schools.'*

(Ross Epp, 1999, p. 18)

The most common complaints by students, especially in private schools<sup>9</sup> – where children feel they have a right to complain – are related to the professional competence of teachers and their teaching methods: an excess of homework,

lecture-style teaching and low-level content. In the majority of schools, the teaching methods most commonly described can be summed up as listening to the teachers' explanation, summarising, doing exercises and correcting them.

*Now read, summarise, explain and do the exercises.* (Male student, Year 4, School 5)

*They make you read a bit each and they explain, and then they carry on reading, explaining and reading...* (Male student, Year 4, School 3)

*They say bla, bla, bla and that's it...if you understood it, that's fine, and if not, that's fine too.* (Female student, Year 4, School 2)

*Yes. Because they don't explain, and you're copying a really long part, and you don't understand it, and they just explain it the same way.* (Female student, Year 1, School 5)

The connection between the professional competence of the teachers and the emergence of classroom conflict seems evident, and is something that showed up in the focus group discussions and again in the interviews.

*But the classes are really shit, and then they call your parents to say that you don't do anything, that you cause trouble.* (Male student, Year 4, School 1)

*Ideal and contested identities: 'I see myself as completely the opposite of what they want'*

In schools that promote an ideal student profile that combines academic success with social skills, among peers it is best to be seen as sociable and 'everybody's friend'. Therefore, better relationships of coexistence are promoted where compatibility between the academic and the pro-social is valued. However, this was only observed in one of the high-prestige private schools with students drawn from the middle and upper social classes, where the whole community expects a high level of performance from the school and its teachers.

- R: *What do you think is the ideal student profile in the school?*  
S1: *I don't know. Maybe like [name of student; the girl interviewed as a positive leader].*  
R: *How would you define her?*  
S2: *Very open...*  
S1: *Studios, very friendly, laughs a lot, she's always laughing and happy...*



S2: *Yes...she's like always really positive, you never see her like that...always has a smile on her face, she's quite mature I think too...*

S1: *Yes*

S2: *Socially she's got time for everything, for friends, for being with everyone, so in the end everyone gets on with her.*

S1: *She's got girlfriends too, they meet up a lot, I don't know...*

(S1 – female student, S2 – male student, Year 4, School 4)

The ideal profiles promoted most intensely in the rest of the schools in the study are based on pro-academic and pro-authority identities, but without any specific links to social skills in terms of either relationships with peers or adults. And no incentive is offered to pursue those identities – something that corresponds to the low degree of participation by students in classes and in school. For most students, the notion of participating is limited to answering the teacher's questions. They either do not know how to participate in the decisions taken by the school, or – especially in private schools – feel that their participation is allowed but tightly controlled. Students tend to think that the school is largely concerned with producing good academic results and that they are expected to adopt an attitude of apparent studiousness, of 'paying attention', as well as an unquestioning acceptance of school authority ('shut up and do as I say'). Relationships with teachers are perceived as social capital (i.e., it is advantageous to be a 'teacher's pet'). It is a conformist, silenced identity that uses the strategies of subterfuge. This is a good example of students describing what is expected of them:

S1: *Someone who never skips class, who studies, doesn't talk and is a bit of a teacher's pet.*

S2: *I don't know. Yeah, like this.*

(S1 – male student, S2 – female student, Year 4, School 2)

R: *What do you think the ideal student is like in this school?*

S: *One who pays attention, gets good grades.*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 5)

In schools with a majority of middle class students, there appears to be greater tolerance of diversity of dress and leisure habits. The main axes of maturity/immaturity that are seen through body appearance, dress and leisure habits create different, mutually exclusive groups that affect relationships of coexistence, but also have dimensions of social class: 'chavs' versus 'skaters'; 'brats' versus

'chavettes'. These are oppositions and distinctions in identity that interweave gender, class, age, lifestyle and consumption habits, as well as ethnic/national origin and habitual language, suggesting that these differences should be taken into account by the school as being fundamental in friend or enemy relationships. However, there are two other dimensions in which the school institution itself plays a key role: the *attitude to school* (being either a rebel or a conformist in class) and, linked to the former, the *attitude in peer relationships* (between 'marginalised' and 'hooligans'). The construction of gender and sociability is interrelated with the attitude toward school, given that it is precisely the male students perceived as being conflictive that are most popular socially and also most desirable sexually to the girls. Therefore, opposition to school and peer aggression forms part of the construction of traditional heterosexual masculinity (which continues to be mainly dominating), as has been shown by other researchers (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Swain, 2003), where this masculinity implicitly brings with it resistance to school authority.

S: *The most popular are the ones who get into most trouble.*

R: *Why do you think they are so popular?*

S: *Because they are troublemakers.*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 5)

*...It depends on what you like. For example, the Peruvian girls like Peruvian boys, the girls like the lads with attitude, and the lads...and so on...but the successful ones are a bit fit and give it a bit of attitude. I don't like them with attitude, but yeah, normally they are.* (Female student, Year 4, School 2)

However, among the girls, popularity is implicit in the evaluation of the female body, since the most popular young girls are the prettiest and most attractive physically in the eyes of the boys.

R: *Who are the most popular girls in the school?*

S1: *The ones with the best bodies...[expresses this more with hand gestures, as if he was holding one...]*

R: *Don't stop...*

S1: *The ones who are fit, the fit ones...well, the ones that aren't bitter and bad-tempered...*

S2: *Yes, the ones that aren't stroppy, the ones who are nice to you, and have a pretty face and...*

S1: *And if they're fit, even better.*

(S1 & S2 – male students, Year 4, School 5)

In schools in working class districts, the pretty ones also have to be ‘hard’ and ‘a bit rebellious’. In these areas it is much more difficult to be ‘respected’ if you don’t show that you’re prepared to take insults or jokes. These are the codes that govern student-to-student relationships:

R: *Don't you get on with each other in general?*

S: *It's just that I've changed...before I was really like that, and here if you haven't got, to put it crudely, a pair of balls, you won't last a minute because I remember that I went in and I was like I was and they started on me, and they even wanted to hit me, and I've got a really strong character but I never showed it, and then I did show it and they said, well that stupid girl isn't so stupid, so I carried on like that, and now, yeah, people respect me...but they also have an idea about me that isn't true. Because now I'm behaving how I am [talking about the time of the interview] but the people in class see me as 'yeah, man, whatever' you know what I mean? They see me as mouthy and I'm not like that, I am super. People see me as being like mouthy, revolutionary, because I don't go to class...*

(S – female student, Year 4, School 2)

The data from questionnaires show that male students continue to be the main figures in acts of physical aggression: 6.4% of boys replied that they had regularly hit one of their classmates, compared with 1.4% of the girls. Models of femininity and masculinity – and even more when these are related to a social class that is implicitly or explicitly de-legitimised by the school authority – have a strong influence on relationships of coexistence. Schools that do not manage to create social inclusion in their institutional environment and which attend sectors of the population which already perceive themselves to be excluded in the social sphere promote separations among peers according to their attitudes of conformity or rebellion toward the school.

*Exclusions and diversity: 'They pick on the Arabs a lot'*

Despite the fact that 40% of the young people in the survey reported that they had never felt insulted or ridiculed, 22.1% of foreign origin students reported that they had been ‘frequently’ or ‘always’ insulted, compared with only 12.4% for local origin students. Most of the students denied feeling isolated at school, but among those who claimed to feel alone, the percentage of young people of foreign origin was double that of young people of national origin (18.7% and 9.3%

respectively, combining the ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ categories). The statements made by some foreign origin students makes their sensation of vulnerability evident, something that is not seen in most of the studies on coexistence, where neither ethnic-national origin, phenotypical characteristics nor family language use are taken into consideration. Despite this situation, there is a general absence in schools of plans or policies designed to combat racism and promote cultural coexistence. Here is some evidence from an Ecuadorian student:

S: *I want them to come more often [referring to the police], there are always problems, the other day they smashed my nose in a fight because they were insulting me and hitting me.*

(...)

R: *Do you have problems with your classmates?*

S: *Yes, they are all really immature and they see me being quiet and they pick on me. They get [name of boy] every day, something happens and it's [name of boy], always [name of boy] (...) The other day [name of boy] insulted me in class and I did him over in IT. And in the Catalan class I didn't hit him because the teacher came.*

(...)

S: *And when I get tired I start to hit out, start punching people.*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 2)

Our qualitative data showed that the experience of the Gypsy minority in these schools is also dominated by aggression and insults by their classmates, some of whom are foreign origin students who have themselves been assaulted by classmates. So the spiral of exclusion and violence grows. Young Moroccans, for example, for whom we were not able to collect any evidence in this study as they were not selected by the teachers for interviews in any of the diverse categories that we proposed (this in itself is an important piece of information that will form part of our research at a different time), are spoken of by their classmates as constant victims of aggression.

R: *What about in the other school?*

S: *No, it was in primary that there were problems. But in this school it doesn't happen as far as I know. What I have seen, and more last year, is that the Arabs get picked on a lot.*

R: *Who picks on them?*

S: *The Spanish. There were some that went around as if they owned the place, and they picked on them a lot...*

- R: *And how did the Arabs react?*
- S: *No, no, they didn't do anything, because they were weaker, and they saw that they were being marginalised...I did see that happen.*
- R: *And did anybody say anything?*
- S: *No, everyone ignored it and did like when there aren't any teachers, and they don't say anything so they don't get hit afterwards. But you could see one looking in the mirror and they were hitting him.*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 2)

The only exclusion that is apparently minimised is that of gender, given that girls feel that they receive equal treatment to boys at school, although they do show lower indexes of self-confidence (13% of girls and 5% of boys do not agree with the statement 'I like myself as I am').

Finally, behaviour such as insults and even physical aggression against male students who have masculinities that do not fall into line with the traditional gender models continue to be present in schools, both in working class and middle class environments. Some schools carry out occasional activities intended to foster gender equality and tolerance in tutorials and talks, but in general do not have cohesive plans to offset the gender values common in the school environment and among the students' home environment, such as homophobia, and in some cases, students even think that such talks by their teachers legitimise behaviour that is anti-homosexual. Not demonstrating a traditional male identity places a male student in a highly vulnerable position among his peers.

- R: *Is there anyone who doesn't have friends, who is all alone?*
- S: *No, it's not that they don't have friends but they're very weak...for example there is a really effeminate boy and even I recognise that I've gone over the top with him sometimes...and there are some who come and hit him and they told me all sorts of things from last year...Oh my God.*
- R: *Like what for example?*
- S: *Well they hit him, and then loads of people came and hit him, and they called him a poof, and because they see he's really weak and every time they come for him he's with the girls, and they know that the girls won't do anything, well...*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 2)

*Diversification vs. homogenisation: 'Neither more stupid nor cleverer: levelled'*

Segregation of students by academic performance, including the creation of reinforcement groups for certain students in certain subjects, contributes to naturalise and interiorise stigmas and hierarchies in students' minds about their own classmates. 'Low' group students develop increasing hostility toward peers in the 'high' groups as well as a negative view of themselves as students. This stratification ends up causing students to make generalisations about their peers according to the class groups they belong to:

S2: *In Class A are the swots, in Class B as well, Class C is mixed and in Class D are the hooligans.*

R: *And what do you think about being in Class D?*

S1: *I don't care. I wouldn't like to be in Class A, they are all prats and daddy's boys.*

(S1 & S2 – male students, Year 4, School 1, 'Low' group)

S1: *In Class A they are all people who might later do a module or work and in Class B they're people who'll do Baccalaureate or they think that...*

S2: *They have a chance of doing it...*

(S1 – female student, S2 – male student, Year 4, School 2, 'Low' group)

R: *Did they organise the classes by level?*

S: *I don't know, but in the other class there are people who are repeating the year and they are more behind.*

(S – male student, Year 4, School 2, 'Low' group)

In some of the schools in the sample, the 'low' level group was placed in an area apart from the other classes, adding a physical dimension to their symbolic separation, as could be seen in the results of the questionnaires. The effects are clearly negative, since some of the tutors interviewed even recognised the extra effort they had to make to motivate these students and include them in school life. In the schools where groups were made up of students regarded as diverse in terms of ability, students thought that in their classes there was 'a bit of everything', and the schools that experimented with completely flexible groupings<sup>10</sup> promoted relationships of companionship, since the perception of isolation was reduced and the perception of an improved situation of coexistence between students increased.

- R: *What do you think of this kind of organisation?*
- S1: *I think it's good, because you learn to work in a group, well at my school we did that too but we always had to say you, you and you, and then you had the group. I think it's very good for learning to work in a group. For togetherness.*
- S2: *I think it's good, because whether you like it or not you always meet new people, of course you have to get to know them working for a year you get to know people, afterward outside you go with who you want, don't you? But you meet more people.*

(S1 – female student, S2 – male student, Year 4, School 4)

The school itself contributes to the creation of envy and malaise through the organisation of groups by academic performance and risks promoting aggressive relationships. For example, two of the students in a 'high' group explained how two classmates of weaker physique were bothered by some of the students in the 'low' group, in clear response to the subordinate position assigned to them as members of a low-prestige group.

*Rules and discipline: Where do they come from? How are they understood? And how is social order achieved?*

Some 59.8% of students at private schools and some 45.4% at state schools reported that conflicts of coexistence were most frequently resolved using dialogue, with a higher degree of satisfaction in conflict resolution being expressed by the former. A strict system of rules merely enforced through punishment appears to be negative for coexistence. However, a strict system of rules may have a positive effect when the rules encourage negotiation, and data suggest that this is more often happening in schools with high academic expectations of students, families and teachers, typically the private ones. A joint process of close academic and personal counseling by class tutors in these schools, where teachers are clearly expected to account for results in this sense, acts as an emotional cushion and facilitates tolerance and even identification with the system of rules.

Two of the elements mostly responsible for a school's positive climate are the presence of rules drawn up by the school community as a whole, where students and teachers in all categories perceive themselves as participants to a certain extent, and the perception that the rules are applied consistently in the resolution of conflicts without relevant perceptions of injustice. In this regard, 59% of students reported that school conflicts were resolved fairly and 62.4% thought that all teachers used the same criteria to apply the rules. The way in which sanctions

are applied is an important factor, since arbitrary and unreasonable application of punishments on the one hand and the devaluation of the effect of written warnings on the other appear to be serious factors in the creation of malaise at school and resistance among young people. Such things lead to a general devaluation of the system of rules, which thus becomes less effective when more serious problems arise.

R: *What do they normally punish you for most? Do they send notes home?*

S1: *For the smallest, stupidest thing they'll give you a note.*

S2: *Sometimes you say something and you think they're going to give you a note, and sometimes you say another thing and they say 'Note!' And what are you supposed to do?*

S1: *When you deserve one, they don't give you one.*

(S1 – female student, S2 – male student, Year 4, School 2)

Students' reactions were extremely negative before their perception of authoritarianism, defined by the existence of teachers who would not allow students' intervention, who use punishment frequently and who always impose their own opinion. The threat of heavy sanctions to prevent those problems perceived as being extremely serious, such as physical fights, substance consumption and dealing, physical aggression against teachers, may be an effective element of control. However, if students are not included in the rule-making process or in their application and high expectations of their behaviour are not placed on them, then other long term consequences may come about, such as the intensification of levels of resignation and lack of motivation among students, paradoxically leading to classroom disruption, high levels of absenteeism or aggressive peer-to-peer relations outside school.

#### *Relationships with the teachers: 'They should inspire confidence'*

With respect to relationships of proximity between teachers and students, quantitative analysis of our questionnaire results showed that 73.2% of young people 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the relationships were good. Nevertheless, 11.3% reported that teachers 'often' or 'always' ridiculed them. When the students feel that they are listened to by the school as represented by their teachers, this even seems to compensate for strict rules and high levels of punishment. A quality tutorial project and a relation of trust between teachers and students are preventive factors in terms of the generation of confrontation.



Emotional closeness is one of the highest demands of the students, especially among lower-middle and working classes, together with the demand for 'respect', since some of them complain of cold treatment and even public humiliation as a normal part of school life. They want teachers who, in addition to knowing their field, are pleasant and involved as people, have a basically benign attitude toward students and do not automatically resort to punishment:

*They should be more involved with the kids, and not send us out when we have a joke. (Male student, Year 4, School 1)*

*They should be kind, explain things to you well, make you laugh, make a little joke if you are bored of listening, I dunno, be a good teacher. (Female student, Year 4, School 2)*

*They should tell you things about themselves. (Male student, Year 4, School 3)*

In connection with this, we might recall the observation by Valenzuela (1999) with respect to the centrality of what she calls the 'politics of caring'. It would seem to be exactly what students in our study are asking for of the school as a model for good relations and as a social context in which they spend a good part of their days.

But it can also be concluded that the majority of students in our sample do not see their schools as 'dangerous places', as Potts (2006) has called them. They felt good about their schools and had a lot of friends (86%) in an environment where they, as youth, place considerable value on peer friendships: 73.7% valued the importance of friends as an influence on their personality. Moreover, most of them (75.5%) agreed that their school encouraged positive relations, despite the fact that certain specific practices provoked malaise, such as teachers' ridiculing of their learning efforts, the non-generation of relationships of trust, invasion in spheres that they considered to be private and non-intervention in cases of physical violence. More specifically concerning bullying behaviours, 14.3% of students responded that they had been insulted, spoken badly of or ridiculed 'frequently' or 'always', while those who did not report ever having received this treatment accounted for 41.3%. In relation to physical violence, 4.7% reported that their classmates hit them 'frequently' or 'always', while 79.2% confirmed that they had never been hit.

The analysis of interviews, however, revealed the profiles of students who are especially vulnerable in school: academically-inclined students with few social skills; young homosexuals or those with non-conventional masculinities/femininities; those who change schools and social contexts and who have to learn

a new cultural code of peer relationships; those from a low-prestige social class or ethnic-national origin; but also students from ‘majority’ groups perceived as being weak and who thus more easily fall victim to the ‘revenge’ of students from minority or marginalised social sectors.

## **Concluding remarks**

This study gives some clear indications about what the key factors are in terms of creating a school climate that promotes solidarity and togetherness among students. The affective expectations that students have about their school, how students from one year are separated into smaller groups and the degree of recognition and legitimation of the differences between students as manifested by the practices of the school institution obviously have a bearing on how students deal with each other at school. Likewise, the style of authority exercised by the institution is important, with a need for consistency in the application of rules and sanctions as well as a sense that students are participating in the governance of the school. It is also essential that the quality of classroom instruction is such that students are not bored and active participation by students is fostered and encouraged. Last but not least, the type of student profile that is promoted by the school as an institution through daily practice and interaction can have a considerable impact on student peer-to-peer relations.

Obviously, schools differ between themselves in climate and culture and so do the schools in our sample. In this paper, we have identified and analysed some of the range of elements that commonly emerged in all of them that had an impact on peer relations though in varying importance and intensity as experienced by students. Three years after the public hearing to the Catalan Ombudsman report based on our larger study in the Catalan autonomous parliament, the Department of Education has created a mandatory programme<sup>11</sup> for all schools to implement with the aim to promote positive social relations. Unfortunately, it only partially draws attention to the role played by the school climate and culture on the nature and quality of peer relations and focuses by large on a disturbing and pervasive notion of inherent conflict as part of contemporary youth.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in Spanish at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on School Violence (2007) organised by the University of Almería, Spain. The authors take equal responsibility for the paper.
2. See, for example I. Viar Echevarría's paper in *Diariovasco.com* (14/02/06).
3. L'Institut de l'Infància i Món Urbà (CIIMU) is a consortium created by the Barcelona City Council, the Barcelona Provincial Council, the Universitat de Barcelona, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.
4. Language is a key element in any study of this sort in Catalonia given that most of the student population is, to some extent, bilingual in Catalan and Spanish, and there are also increasing numbers of first or second generation immigrant children who may speak a third language (or more) at home.
5. In a conversation with the coordinator of Year 4 in one of the secondary schools included in the study, the explanation she gave for how the groups were formed was '*First of all we make the structure and then we place the students in the structure that we have created*'. In other words, the groups were created with pre-assigned and different levels of prestige, since the basis for grouping at the school in question was academic performance for a standardised categorisation, not the real students' characteristics and/or needs.
6. In Educació Secundària Obligatòria (ESO), students are typically aged 12 to 16.
7. The Unitat de Suport a la Convivència Escolar (USCE) is a special unit of support to help schools in situations of conflict resolution, basically developing mediation strategies. It is also in charge of training activities and courses on mediation for teachers.
8. The total number of students in each 'Year' (i.e., form or grade) are divided into several (typically four) groups. In 'homogeneous' grouping, students are separated according to academic level (what is known in the literature as 'streaming'). The tutor is the teacher who is in charge of all the students in a particular group.
9. Although the many so-called 'escoles privades concertades' in Catalonia are technically private, they also receive subsidies from the Catalan government.
10. New groups were formed for each new task that the students had to complete.
11. Programa de Convivència i Mediació Escolar (see <http://www.xtec.cat/innovacio/convivencia>).

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