



Confrontations and Resolutions: The World of Conflict between Students

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Abstract

The study aims to examine conflict situations between students "from inside" based on research carried out within the framework of the project organised by the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development entitled "Alternative dispute resolution, interest-based negotiation and restorative techniques in the operational and educational practice of vocational schools" . After a short summary of different viewpoints on conflicts and conflict situation, we examine the presence, detection and involvement of students in various conflict situations (as aggressors or victims), and we attempt to identify the direct and indirect causes of conflicts between students based on information provided by interviewees. Then, we examine the reactions of students and teachers to these conflicts and discuss their methods and techniques for resolving the conflict by reviewing the frequency of various reaction types, the way they are perceived and how widely accepted they are.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution

Conflicts and conflict situations between students

First of all, it is necessary to make a distinction between conflicts/conflict situations, bullying and aggression/violence. Typically, Hungarian specialised literature discusses violence at school (Abonyi, 1999 HELYETT 1997; Gábor & Novák, 1999; Vajda, 1999; Utasi, 2000; Figula, 2003; Ligeti & Csordás, 2003; Figula, 2004a, 2004b; Kollár, 2005; Ligeti, 2006), bullying at school (Dambach, 2001; Mihály, 2003; Boross, 2006), or, rarely, both topics (Figula, 2004c), and/or conflicts at school (Mayer, 2008; Mayer & Vígh, 2008; Mayer, Nádori & Vígh, 2009).

The concepts of aggression, violence and bullying are clarified by Olweus (1999, pp. 718-719), who states that *bullying* is a type of *aggression or aggressive behaviour* where the aggressor intends to cause harm or discomfort to another person. At the same time, Olweus makes a distinction between aggression/aggressive behaviour and violence/violent behaviour. He highlights that *violent behaviour is a type of aggressive behaviour when the aggressor intentionally causes physical harm or discomfort to another person*.

The definition of the conflict situations examined in our analysis is based, on the one hand, on the above mentioned definitions and, on the other hand, on the typology created by Buda et al. (Buda, Kőszeghy & Szirmai, 2008), in the research "*Dangers in Schools*" (Hajdu & Sáska, 2009; Aáry-Tamás & Aronson, 2010). Buda et al. – partly on the basis of the definition discussed above – distinguish situations on the basis of the *form* of bullying (verbal– non-verbal) and the *type* of bullying (direct – indirect). They also introduce a categorisation of physical and non-physical forms of bullying. The typology used for the purposes of the research by the commissioner for educational rights fall in line with these categories inasmuch as the latter differentiates between the verbal and non-verbal forms of aggression.

In our analysis, we define "conflict situation" as a situation where one person intentionally causes harm to another person verbally or non-verbally, directly or indirectly, physically or non-physically. This means that our definition is very close to Olweus' definition of aggression.

The frequency of conflict situations

Our questionnaire examined five conflict situations between students (name calling, ostracising, coercion, fighting, stealing) from three aspects: the perception of the conflict situation, and the frequency of becoming an aggressor and becoming a victim.

With regard to students' and teachers' perception of a conflict, it is to be noted that students' acts are invariably interpreted and evaluated in the socio-cultural context of the given school and community; consequently, the evaluation of a given act may vary from school to school, from community to community, from person to person (see Sáska, 2008).

The questionnaire survey data show that students perceive name calling as the most frequent type of conflict situations: 60% of those asked say that such situations are frequent. 35% and 31% of students report a high frequency of ostracising a peer, respectively coercing (psychological abuse or terrorising) a peer. One fifth of the students think that stealing is frequent in their school, while one fifth of them feel the same about physical abuse.

The rate of the being an aggressor or becoming victim in a conflict situation is considerably lower than the perceived rates. In the case of a specified conflict situation, the rate of all (reported) frequent aggression and the (reported) rate of becoming a victim frequently do not exceed 7% and 6%, respectively. Most students mention name calling as a form of conflict situation: 7% and almost 50% of them report that they call their peers names often and sometimes, respectively.

3-3% of students say that they often hit or ostracise a peer; one fourth of them report that they do so sometimes. *Physical abuse*, similarly to *ostracism*, were experienced by approximately one fifth of students. Almost 3% of students report that they often *coerce* a peer. 12% of them say they do so less frequently. The rate of the victims of coercion is approximately 10%. The greatest differences are detected in the case of *stealing*: almost 96% of students report that they have never stolen anything from their peers, while a relatively large number of them (44%) say that things were stolen from them at school.¹

¹ It is to be noted that, in many cases, students feel as victims of stealing even when they simply lose a something.

Table 1: The perception of conflicts, being an aggressor and a victim (among students)

		Frequently	Sometimes	Never	Total	N
At your school, how often do students...	... call another student names	58.6	35.4	6	100	3881
	... ostracise another student	35.0	51.2	13.8	100	3882
	... coerce those who are smaller or weaker	31.6	42.7	25.7	100	3889
	... hit another student	20.1	53.3	26.6	100	3886
	... steal from each other	21	51.1	28	100	3882
		Frequently	Sometimes	Never	Total	N
How often do you...	... call another student names	6.8	49.3	44	100	3891
	... ostracise another student	3.5	24.0	72.5	100	3888
	... coerce students who are smaller or weaker than you	2.7	12.1	85.2	100	3896
	... hit another student	3.2	26.2	70.6	100	3891
	... steal something	0.8	2.8	96.3	100	3897
		Frequently	Has already occurred at least once	Never	Total	
	... get mocked	5.5	50.5	44	100	3890
	... get ostracised	3.2	20.5	76.3	100	3883
	... get coerced	1.4	7.8	90.8	100	3888
	... get hit	1.4	18.3	80.3	100	3889
	... have something stolen from you	3.1	44.8	52.1	100	3893

Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

An examination of active involvement in the five types of events listed shows that about one third of students say they have never been active participants in any of the event types. 27% of students have provoked one situation, approximately 20% have provoked two, 11% three and 6% four situations.

Students are categorised into four groups depending on if they have ever initiated or suffered a conflict situation. Somewhat more than 50% of students have been aggressors and victims as well at least on one situation (*"aggressor-and-victim" type*). Approximately 13% of them report that they have never experienced such situations either as aggressors or as victims (*"neither-victim-nor-aggressor" type*). About the same number of students have actively provoked at least one conflict situation and yet have never been victims (*"aggressor" type*). Finally, slightly more than one fifth (22%) of students have been victims at least once but have never provoked a conflict situation (*"victim" type*).²

² If the cases of the most frequent and less severe conflict situation type (name calling) are removed, the number of students categorised as of the aggressors type is reduced by almost 20%, while the rate of those in the category of "aggressors-and-victims" doubles and the rate of "neither-aggressors-nor-victims" increases by 7%.

Table 2: The correlation between being a victim and being an aggressor (%)

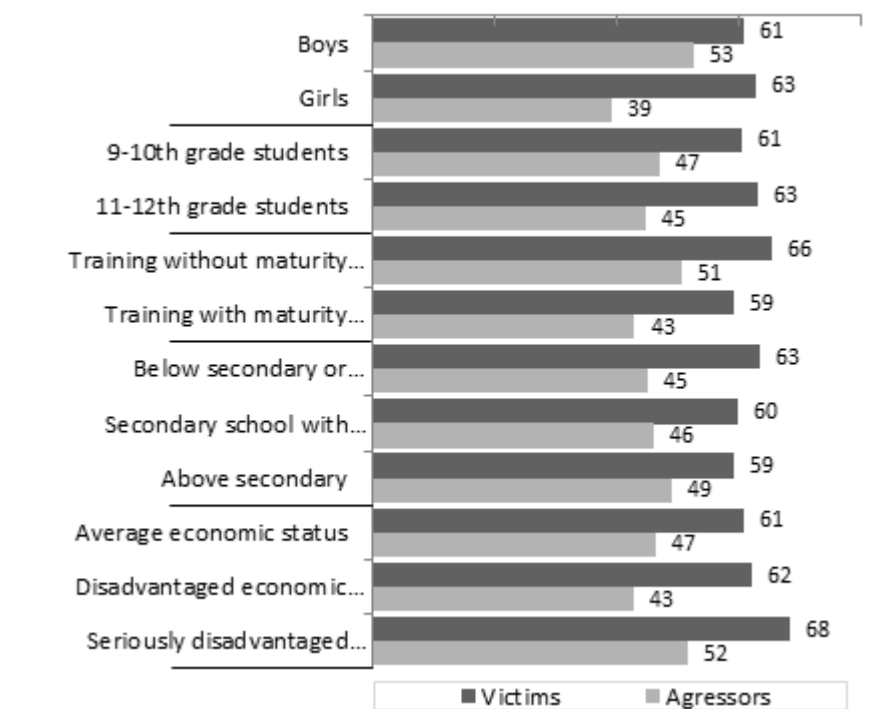
N = 3,908 p = 0.000	Not a victim in any conflict situation	Victim in at least one situation	Total
Not an aggressor in any conflict situation	12.6 neither-aggressors-nor-victims	22.0 victims	34.6
Aggressor in at least one situation	13.5 aggressors	51.9 aggressors-and-victims	65.4
Total	26.2	73.8	100

Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

Boys were more likely to be aggressors than girls in all of the conflict types studied. The biggest difference is detected in the category of physical abuse. 40% of boys reported that they frequently or rarely hit a peer; the rate among girls is 18%. The difference is relatively big in the category of name calling: 61% of the boys and 50% of the girls said that they frequently or sometimes call their peers names. The smallest difference between boys and girls is detected in the categories of ostracising and stealing (2-3%). *As far as the education programme is concerned*, the rate of students acting as aggressors in conflict situations is invariably higher among students attending programmes that do not end with a secondary school leaving examination. The biggest difference (10%) is detected in the category of physical aggression: one third of those attending programmes that do not end with a secondary school leaving examination reported that physically abuse their peers, as opposed to the rate of one fourth among those studying on a programme that ends with secondary school leaving examination. In most cases, being an aggressor shows statistical correlation with the *school qualification* of the mother of the student who acts as an aggressor. Albeit there is no significant difference in frequency, it is still noticeable that those students whose mothers have a school qualification higher than secondary school graduation (with leaving certificate) are more likely to become aggressors or to report such cases in questionnaires. The *family and economic background*³ is a stronger explanatory variable. Students living in severe deprivation are twice as likely to initiate a conflict than their peers with a more favourable financial situation.

³ For the purposes of the questionnaire survey, an aggregated variable was defined on the basis of variables related to students' family and financial background (if they have a car, a computer and Internet access; if the electricity supplier has ever cut off electricity due to failure to pay electricity bills; if heating was cut off due to lack of financial resources) with standardisation. On the basis of the continuous variable defined with this method, students were categorised into three groups: (1) those with an average status (such families typically have a car, a computer and Internet access, and do not face severe financial problems), (2) deprived students (if compared to group 1, their families are less likely to have a computer or Internet access, only few of them have a car, yet only few of them face severe financial problems) and (3) severely deprived students (if compared to group 1, their families are less likely to have a car, the vast majority of them do not have a computer or Internet access, and almost 50% of them face severe financial problems).

Figure 1: Becoming an aggressor and a victim by gender, grade, programme type and family background (mother's highest education, economic status of the family) (%)



Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

With regard to becoming a victim, three out of the five conflict situations exhibited a statistically significant difference in terms of *sex*: girls are more likely to become victims of ostracism and stealing, while boys are more likely to suffer physical aggression. In terms of the *education programme*, two conflict situations show such a difference: the rate of victims of physical aggression and stealing is higher in education programmes which do not end with a secondary school leaving examination. The *family's financial background* is another strong explanatory variable with regard to becoming a victim. Deprived and severely deprived students are more likely to become victims in a conflict situation.

Almost one fourth of the interviewees reported that they do not want to go to school because they are (frequently or sometimes) afraid of being pestered by a peer or a teacher. 9% and 11% of the students are afraid of being pestered only by teachers and only by peers, respectively, while 5% are afraid of being pestered by both teachers and peers.

The study was intended to detect if such fears are based on actual experience, that is, to what extent the categories of those who often become victims in a conflict situation and of those who report that they are often afraid of being pestered by peers overlap. 40% of students who often do not want to go to school because they are afraid of a peer are potential victims, falling into the category of "victims". They are the individuals who suffer the most psychological strain as a result of becoming victims (they make up 1.3%

of all interviewees). At the same time, more than three fourths of those in the category of „*neither-aggressor-nor-victim*” have never been afraid to go to school because of their peers' behaviour. 60% of students who are often "afraid" belong to the category of “*aggressor-and-victim*”.

Those who are often afraid of being pestered by a peer are the most likely to become victims of name calling and ostracising. Among those who often become victims of a specific conflict type, the victims of coercing and ostracising are afraid to go to school. More than one fifth of girls are (often or sometimes) afraid of being pestered by a peer; the rate among boys is one tenth.

The world of conflict between students as perceived by teachers

The frequency of the conflicts examined during the research is perceived differently (even though in statistically significant way) by various parties in schools. Data evidence that persons higher in the school hierarchy are less aware of conflicts. Invariably, students perceive conflicts the most frequently, while teachers are aware of less conflicts and school leaders even less. This difference is the greatest in the case of *name calling*, a relatively frequent conflict type: 59% of students reported such situations to be frequent, while this rate was 38% and 21% among teachers and school leaders, respectively. Major differences were detected in the categories of *ostracising* and *coercing* as well; however, the perception/assumption of teachers and school leaders displayed smaller difference. Students', teachers' and school leaders' experiences of conflicts show the smallest difference in the category of *physical aggression* and *stealing*. As for stealing, 21% of the students, 20% of the teachers and 10% of the school leaders consider it as a frequent event. 20% of the students and 13% of school leaders see physical aggression as a frequent act.⁴

Underlying causes of conflicts

Obviously, the research data do not make it possible to map the causes of each conflict type discussed above. However, in consideration of the answers, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The causes of conflicts are categorised into direct causes and indirect causes. Direct causes are the ones that lead to the escalation of an actual conflict, while indirect causes are underlying or background factors.

Most direct reasons are rather perceived (or even real)-grievances, such as: „*Why are you looking at me?*” or „*Why are you looking at my girlfriend?*”, „*Why did you push me?*”(even if the pushing was incidental), which can be considered as *concealed causes*

⁴ It is to be noted that within one institution considerable differences can be detected in terms of perception by students and teachers: the difference rate can be as high as 50% for stealing, 65% for name calling, 42% for physical aggression and 50% for bullying.

rather than attempts made to resolve the real conflict. Another frequent cause is fight for a status or a position in the school (Ranschburg, 2008). Conflicts related to fight for a position or a status in a class are more frequent in classes characterised by a high fluctuation rate or where students study more than one profession. In the latter case, students studying different professions tend to rival.

Teachers participating in the survey reported that students often initiate a conflict situation or pester their peers in order to release tension or, frequently, simply react to boredom; teasing and pestering the others can be regarded as a form of amusement.

In many cases, the underlying causes of conflicts are related to students' socialisation problems. This means that – due to the family background – in the course of their socialisation by the family students fail to acquire the basic norms of social behaviour (or behaviour in an institution), do not experience examples of proper interpersonal communication and relationships, and do not learn to manage, process and control their feelings and conflicts.

School types and the frequency of conflicts between students

The study was intended to define the distribution of conflict situations between institutions and the characteristics of those institutions where conflicts are more prevalent.

For the purposes of the categorisation of institutions, the three conflict types we regarded as the most severe ones were taken into consideration. The basis of the categorisation was the percentage of students who have been either aggressors or victims of ostracism, coercion and physical aggression⁵ On the basis of the percentage rates, institutions were categorised into three groups: average institutions, where the difference between the percentage of students involved in conflict situations and the average rate of involvement was maximum 10% (33 institutions); institutions with relatively few problems where the rate of those involved was at least 10% lower than the average rate (6 institutions); institutions with relatively many problems, where the rate of those involved was more than 10% higher than the average (10 institutions).⁶

After a typology of institutions was established, the research attempted to define the correlation between the specific background variables and the amounts of problems in the given institution:

⁵ Name calling, the most frequently occurring conflict situation and stealing as an indirect form of interpersonal conflict were not taken into consideration.

⁶ It must be noted that the average rate of those involved in the selected types of conflicts is very high (61%), the highest and the lowest rates being 44% and 84%.

- the rate of students who (frequently or sometimes) do not want to go to school because they are afraid of a peer is the highest in schools with problems;
- results seem to evidence that the size of the school correlates with the frequency of conflicts: two thirds of the institutions with problems have more than 1,000 students (big schools), while all those schools which have a relatively low number of problems have less than 1,000 students.
- the rate of deprived or severely deprived students is the highest in institutions with problems;
- the rate of those students who overall do not feel good at school is the highest in institutions with problems;
- the attitude of students displayed in conflict situations⁷ correlates with the fact if the school have problems or not:
- the *power* based attitude and the *passive* attitude show positive correlation with the fact if the school has problems, which means that the stronger either of the attitudes is, the more problems the school has;
- *the conflict resolution attitude* shows a negative correlation: the stronger the attitude, the less problems are detected.

Responses to conflict situations and their perception

The way students respond to conflicts sheds light on their conflict resolution skills, while teachers' reactions give information about the models students may see during conflict resolution processes.

The interviews show that teachers often regard minor conflicts as natural and do not pay particular attention to them. They feel that students resolve such problems quickly. Some are convinced that in certain conflict situations it is advisable not to intervene, as it would cause more harm and disturbance than the conflict itself. Teachers' intervention depends on the individual sensitivity of a teacher: those who are more sensitive are more likely to discover more conflicts, while others perceive less conflicts, and, in many cases, they think students should settle matters by themselves.

The interviews show that a common method of the resolution of conflicts between students is that the parties do not speak to each other and keep their distance. This is often supported and approved by teachers: in one of the institutions under survey, a teacher issued a written "*restraining order*" and the parties involved undersigned it.

In the case of ostracizing, the intervention of peers seems to be a solution; peers may either control the aggressors or may inform teachers. In these cases, students are more likely to ask teachers to help; nevertheless, teachers' intervention options are rather limited as – unless the aggressor is caught in the act – it is exceedingly difficult to prove the aggression or to assess the degree of the harm caused. Even if they are aware of a conflict, teachers often cannot intervene, as victims, being afraid of retaliation, deny the

⁷ Three attitude factors were defined on the basis of a nine-item attitude questionnaire with principal component analysis (power; passivity; conflict resolution) (see Sági & Szemerszki, 2012).

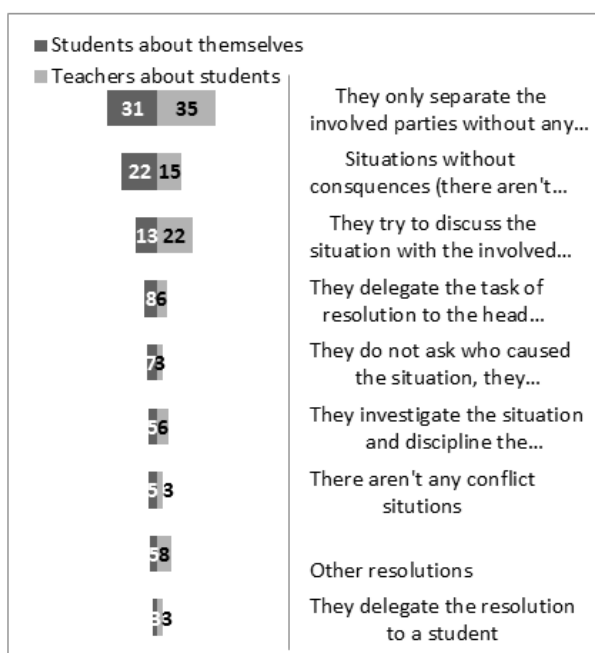
conflict, protect the aggressors or tone down their own harm. Teachers reported varied methods implemented in such cases: they may appoint a peer who protects the victim, may continuously observe the victim or the alleged aggressors, or may accompany the victim. Direct intervention becomes possible, among others, when the aggressor physically abuses the victim; this act serves as a basis of intervention. Those students who are incapable of defending themselves and do not receive help try to avoid conflict situations and have no other option but to tolerate aggression.

Focus group discussions revealed that most students are not interested in the resolution of major conflicts in their schools unless they are directly involved. In the interviews the way of the how conflicts are managed (the way of the conflict resolution) was the less known topic by the pupils. Even if they are directly involved in a conflict, students are more likely to assume a passive role in conflict resolution instead of actively controlling the process; typically, they accept the outcome, even if they do not agree with it. As a rule, students are not motivated to resolve a conflict and do not have an individual demand for constructive conflict resolution. If somebody offered such a solution, they would opt for it; however, rarely do they come up with a concrete idea for constructive resolution. In our opinion, this is a manifestation of a weak attitude towards enforcing one's own interests, which, in turn, can be traced back to the socialisation problems discussed above. When students feel that *"teachers are always right, and nobody's interested in our opinion"* it affects, among others, the resolution of conflicts between students: if students do not feel that teachers treat them as partners, they do not hope that in the course of conflict resolution their demands will be taken seriously in consideration.

Responses to conflict situations were examined in the questionnaire with various approaches. On the one hand, students and teachers were invited to give information about their perception of conflict resolution, more specifically, about the way the stakeholders in their schools respond to a specific conflict. They were also asked to specify which resolution methods they consider to be right and, finally, students were invited to give information about their individual conflict resolution methods.

Most students reported that the most likely method is to separate the involved parties (31%), to ignore the conflict (22%) and to discuss the cause of the conflict in order to seek resolution (13%). Most of the interviewed teachers opined (35%) that students simply separate the parties but do nothing more. More teachers (21%) than students said that students try to discuss the causes of the conflict, while less teachers (15%) than students felt that nothing happens. In other words, the rate of teachers who think that students typically react positively is higher than that of students, while the rate of teachers who feel that students ignore such situations is lower than that of students.

Figure 2: In your school, how do students react when two students start arguing and fighting? (%)



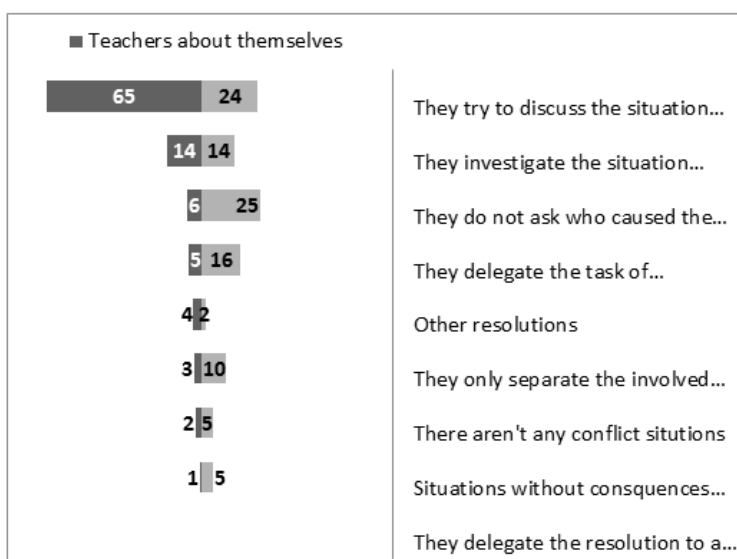
Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

With regard to their own personal reaction, most students reported that when a conflict evolves they try to discuss the problem and find the best solution (55%). Approximately one fifth (18%) of them said that they tackle with each other, and 14% of them opted for passivity.

In the course of the research, students and teachers were invited to give information about teachers' conflict resolution techniques. Approximately one fourth of the *students* highlighted that when a conflict evolves between two students, teachers discipline both parties, and another one fourth of them reported that teachers try to make the parties discuss the cause of the conflict. Another 16% said that teachers delegate the task of conflict resolution to the school's leader, and 14% opined that teachers investigate the situation and discipline the aggressor. 10% of them think that teachers separate the parties but do not do anything else, while 5% feel that nothing happens (that is, teacher do not intervene in conflicts between students). By contrast, almost two thirds of *teachers* reported that they try to discuss the cause of the conflict with those involved. Another 14% pointed out that they investigate the situation and discipline the aggressor. Only 6% of teachers made reference to other options.

As shown by Figure 3, in certain cases there is a substantial difference between teachers' and students' perception. It is to be noted that while almost two thirds of teachers opine that teachers try to discover the causes of the conflict in most cases, not more than roughly one fourth of students share their opinion. By contrast, the rate of those students who reported that teachers often discipline both parties of a conflict without investigating the specific case is higher than that of teachers.

Figure 3: In your school, how do teachers react when two students start arguing and fighting? (%)



Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

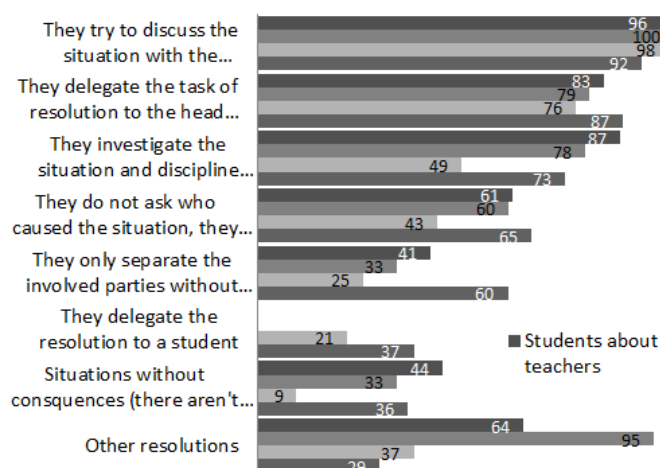
Out of the specified solutions,⁸ most students and most teachers think that the discussion of the cause of the conflict is the best approach. Many *students* feel that, as far as students' conflict resolution strategies are concerned, the best solution is to involve the head of the institution. Three fourths of those students who pointed out that a possible solution is to find and discipline the delinquent student (that is, students make a judgement) said that this is an acceptable option; the rate of teachers who share this opinion is less than 50%.

As for the reaction of teachers, 87% of students accept finding and disciplining the delinquent as an adequate solution, and many of them (83%) think that delegating the task of conflict resolution to the director is acceptable, too. 79% of the teachers said that they consider the delegation of the task to the director as an adequate solution, while 78% opined that it is a good solution to find and discipline the delinquent. The approach based on disciplining both parties involved in the conflict situation is equally accepted by students (61%) and teachers (60%).

Somewhat more than 40% of students and one third of teachers think that reactions (either of students or teachers) that do not offer a real solution (those involved are simply separated / nothing happens) are acceptable.

⁸ Interviewees were asked to elaborate if the reaction they consider to be the most frequent is adequate or inadequate.

Figure 4: The assessment of the reaction marked as the most typical (%)



Source: Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (OFI)

Both students and teachers often involve the form teacher in conflict resolution. Form teachers play a key role in reconciliation. They are the persons who sense most acutely the negative processes in a class; in many cases, teachers who perceive a conflict between students inform the form teacher. In the case of deep conflicts, the form teacher is the key figure: typically, he or she is the person who discusses the issue with those involved in the conflict or resolves the problem involving the whole class. They also play an important role when it comes to resolving students' individual problems.

Conclusions

With an analysis of data collected with qualitative and quantitative methods, our study sought to investigate the main types of conflicts between students in schools, the frequency of each conflict type and the typical responses given to a specific conflict situation and their assessment.

The decreasing order of frequency of the examined conflict types is as follows: name calling, ostracising, coercing, physical aggression and stealing. The number of cases where a student is a victim is always higher than that of the cases when he or she is an aggressor. Data show that students' family and financial background, as well as the type of the education programme display a significant correlation with the frequency of becoming a victim and an aggressor. Moreover, the frequency of becoming an aggressor depends on sex, while that of becoming a victim, on the mother's school qualification.

Half of the students reported that they have already been aggressors or victims in a conflict situation. The rate of students of the "only victim" type victims is ten percentage points higher than that of the "aggressor" type. This fact may be attributed to two possible reasons: first, an aggressor has more than one victim, second, students are more likely to confess that they were victims than to confess that they were aggressors.

The response of parties in the school to a conflict situation as perceived by students and teachers differs greatly. Students report that students typically simply eliminate the conflict situation (separate those involved in the conflict) or ignore the situation, while teachers assume that students use more constructive methods: many of them mention discussion of the cause of the conflict. With regard to teachers' reaction, it can be observed that students are more likely to feel that less constructive solutions are frequent: half of the students opined that if a conflict evolves teachers typically discipline both parties or use discussion as a resolution method; by contrast, teachers thought that they typically use the latter approach.

During the interview, many teachers said or agreed that the main underlying cause of conflicts between students is *problems with socialisation* (see Vajda, 1999). This means that in the course of socialisation by the family students fail to acquire the behavioural norms of communities and institutions, which inevitably results in conflicts. A school can manage such deficiencies most efficiently if they employ a relatively large number of *professionals who offer assistance to students* (psychologists, social workers, youth protection experts, etc.).

The potential socialising effect of teachers' responses is illustrated by the fact that typically three fourths of students agree with the teacher's reactions; therefore, it can be assumed that the majority of students may be receptive to good examples.

The prevention of conflicts is more important than their resolution. Even if a conflict is followed by a reconciliatory meeting or mediation (this typically happens in the case of relatively severe conflicts), not all students participate in it. Consequently, the message reach them slower and less efficiently; in contrast, if the issue is dealt with during the process of education and students face it several times in practice, it is more likely to become an organic part of the culture of the given school community. *Certain special subjects* (e.g. self-knowledge, communication) offer an opportunity for teachers to introduce students to and raise their awareness of conflict resolution methods, which then may be internalised as a part of thoughts about conflicts and of conflict resolution skills. The attitudes of students towards conflicts may be influenced by regular, consistent, decisive interventions, a visible, working, clear policy for dealing with conflicts and the existence of a conflict resolution concept.

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