VALIDATION OF MEDIATION COMPETENCE IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. *We are living in uneasy and unusual times of sharp changes. The situation that arouse due to the spread of COVID-19 is causing serious stress for most of us, which implies emotional tension and hypersensitivity reaction to the information we hear or read. As a result, it leads to even more conflict situations than at any times. School is a part of society. The school environment is exposed to conflict situations both coming from outside and arising inside the school activity (internal conflicts). The ability to find a solution to a conflict implies the mediation competence of a school environment personnel and the students (other scientists call it conflict resolution competence). The aim of the research is to validate the necessity of mediation in school environment and to characterise the mediation competence. The methods of research used: 1) the analysis of theoretical insights and regulatory documents; 2) questionnaire survey; 3) reflection of personal experience. The theoretical research includes the assessment of the opinions of various authors in relation to the mediation competence and the necessity to promote it within the school environment. The empirical research analyses the data acquired by polling of school students (181), teachers (191) and parents (148). In total, 520 respondents participated in the survey. The article validates the necessity of mediation in school environment and the mediation competence. The assessment of the theoretical and empirical research testifies that the promotion of the mediation competence within a school environment is of high importance for all the parties involved in the educational process.*
Keywords: *conflict, mediation, mediation competence, school environment.*

Introduction

We are living in uneasy and unusual times of sharp changes. An individual cannot live without communication and cooperation with the surrounding people. Not always it happens in a constructive way. There are cases when disputes, conflict situations appear. The situation that arouse due to the spread of COVID 19 is causing stress for most of people, which implies emotional tension and hypersensitivity reaction to the information we hear or read. As a result, it leads to even more conflict situations than at any times, including the school environment, as the school is not separated from the society, it is a part of it. The

school environment is exposed to conflict situations both coming from outside and arising inside the school activity (internal conflicts) (Nikulina & Gangur, 2018). That is why it is important to create the environment, which could help in solving these conflicts in a constructive way. This way is mediation. The origins of mediation should be identified in the Ancient China and Japan, and only later it came to Europe. The basics of contemporary mediation formed in the 60s of the 20th century. Nowadays mediation is widely used in legal and other spheres. Settling of a dispute among the parties involved in the mediation process is carried out with the participation of a third person – a mediator. A mediator is a neutral intermediary helping the parties to reach the agreement by creating a new environment for the dialogue (Karnozova, 2013).

The intermediary must be independent from the organisation and/or the parties involved in the dispute. In the beginning of the 21st century, many scientists (Grebenkin, 2017; Horoshevskaya, 2019; Karnozova, 2013; Lűk & Kahn, 2019; Makshanceva & Ovcharenko, 2015; Nikulina & Gangur, 2018, etc.) observed the wide applicability of mediation in the school environment. The authors expressed the opinion that the introduction of mediation could reduce the number of conflicts by improving the psychological climate of a school, promoting the observance of the rights of children and increasing the competence in solving conflicts among teachers and students, which forms a part of the communicative competence. The mediation allows for more freedom in action, it creates the sense of responsibility and more constructive relationships in the school environment. To implement mediation in the school environment, the mediation competence is required for its participants.

The aim of the article is to validate the necessity of mediation in school environment and to characterise the mediation competence.

To achieve the aim of the research, the following methods were chosen: 1) theoretical analysis and synthesis; 2) questionnaire survey; 3) reflection of personal experience; 4) mathematical processing of data (tables, figures).

The theoretical research is analysing the insights of scientists form various countries and regulatory enactments related to mediation, its role in the school environment and the characterisation of the mediation competence. The empirical research, in its turn, is analysing the data acquired through the questionnaire survey.

Validation of Mediation Competence in School Environment and the Vision of the Mediation Competence by Various Authors: *a Literature* R*eview*

A person cannot live without communication, but not always it happens in a constructive way. There are cases of conflict situations and disputes, which require resolution and must be resolved by observing the interests and the needs

of the parties. A German mediator P. Krepper (2012) summarized the possibilities of solving conflicts (See Table 1).

Conflicts can be resolved individually, looking for a common solution or delegating the decision making to third persons. Mediation is a way of conflict solving, when both parties search for the solution together with the agency of a mediator.

*Table 1 **Conflict Resolution Possibilities** (Krepper, 2012)*

Searching for individual solutions	Searching for a common solution	Delegating to third persons
• self-directed violence or violence against other people • psychoanalysis and therapy • consulting / coaching • legal adviser	• directive or moderated conversation • **mediation** • the cooperation law • the Ombudsman's procedure	• the arbitration court (with the right of decision making) • the arbitration notifications / arbitration processes • court proceedings with a judgement
Independent actions ⬅━━━━━━━━━━➡		**External control**

Russian scientist J. Grebenkin defines the mediation as a conversation under certain rules (Grebenkin, 2017).

The classical theories of mediation were connected with a notion of the need, yet the post-modern theories are focusing on the aspect of creation of a purpose (Karnozova, 2013). It is also reflected in the methodological approaches to mediation – transformative mediation, narrative mediation, ecosystem approach, mediation based on understanding, theory of technological mediation etc. (Kurganskaya, 2019; Spangler, 2003/2013; Verbeek, 2015). It is significant that mediation ensures a personalized approach to conflict solving (Kurganskaya, 2019). Mediation is based on certain principles that must be observed by the participants of the mediation process. These are the principle of confidentiality, voluntary involvement, neutrality, equality of rights, flexibility, awareness (Mediacija, 2017).

As already mentioned, initially mediation as a way of conflict solving was widely used in legal and other spheres, and it is gradually entering also the sphere of education. In USA and European countries, mediation in school environment is being implemented since the 80s of the 20th century (including the agemates mediation). Speaking about Latvia, the interest about mediation in the school environment arose in 2007, after the presentation of the material "Mediation in school" prepared with the financing of the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of

Latvia. Therefore, we can speak about forming of the basics of mediation in Latvian school environment. This is also evidenced by the experience of the article authors, one of which is a practising mediator who also provides the mediation studies for teachers, students, parents, social teachers and workers, orphan's court officials for many years. The school mediation is the mediation within the school context (Lűk, Kahn, 2019). It is important to solve conflicts arising in school environment. The following table summarizes the opinions of various authors in relation to school conflicts, their reasons and types (See Table 2).

Table 2 **Types and Reasons of School Conflicts**

Author(s)	Conflict types	Conflict reasons
Makshanceva & Ovcharenko, 2015	Learning organisation, motivation, various type of cooperation. ***Cooperation conflicts*** are separated in a large group of – mutual conflicts among students, teachers, ***intrapersonal*** conflicts teachers and school administration, students and teachers.	Transitional stages in school, lack of unified requirements, teachers failing to obey the applicable requirements. Motivation conflicts are determined by the slackening of interest for studies among the students, low learning motivation. Conflicts are based on a subjective nature and personality factors of the conflicting parties, their aims and values.
(Lűk & Kahn, 2019).	Potential conflicts created by certain people around them (school employees of various levels). ***Intrapersonal*** conflicts.	Conflicts related with a school environment accompanied by individual traits of the participants.

Solving of conflicts of teachers and students are affected by: a) the situation and personality factors of its participants, inequality of rights in terms of the status and age, the fear of teachers related to the loss of reputation and students being afraid of teachers (Kurganskaya, 2019); b) different status, age, life experience, level of consciousness and perception affecting the behaviour of the conflict participants and different levels of responsibility for mistakes (Makshanceva & Ovcharenko, 2015).

Until now, the dominating tendency in the educational system was to assign the mediator functions to a psychologist or a social teacher, who are the members of a certain pedagogical team and cannot perform the role of an independent intermediary, and who not always has sufficient competence in this field (Chupris, 2018). The same is confirmed by the experience of the article authors.

Therefore, involving of a mediator in solving conflicts can change the situation in a school environment significantly. For this purpose, a school administration and

team must accept the philosophy forming the basis of mediation (Chupris, 2018). Analysing the theoretical insights, we can highlight the aspects where mediation can change the situation in a school environment: a) reduction of violence (Karnozova, 2013); b) promotion of cooperation (Mediacija, 2017); c) obeying the rights and obligations of students and teachers (Makshanceva & Ovcharenko, 2015); d) involvement of students in solving of agemates conflicts (Lűk, Kahn, 2019; Nikulina & Gangur, 2018); e) acquisition and improvement of mediation competencies by teachers (Horoshevskaya, 2019).

I. Horoshevskaya provides the important insight speaking about a competent teacher, as for a teacher it is essential to implement his professional knowledge, skills and abilities in his activity. That is why a teacher must continue self-improvement, be able to go beyond his or her profession and to appraise and value his profession. Based on his competence, a teacher can perform various professional tasks, including the task of being a mediator in solving conflicts (Horoshevskaya, 2019). Creation of favourable atmosphere, rendering support to students and cooperation are also underlined in the teacher's profession standard (Skolotāja profesijas standarts, 2020).

To implement mediation in school environment, a ***mediation*** or ***conflictological*** competence is required. The conflictological competence of a teacher in the educational process is one of characteristic features of the communicative culture, which includes the aggregate of knowledge, skills and communicative personal traits, which ensures the teaching and educational process, the influence over the students and the regulation of the communicative activity (Makshanceva & Ovcharenko, 2015).

The authors can agree with the opinion of I. Horoshevskaya, stating that the essence of the mediation competence is linked with the conflict (Horoshevskaya, 2019). As we can call mediation the communication organised in a special way, the communicative competence is a core competence of a mediator, which is defined by L. Karnozova as the ability to create a conscious communication process (Karnozova, 2013). She believes that the communicative competence of a mediator can underline the three aspects: basic communicative skills or communicative literacy; b) mediation tasks and respective techniques; c) specific nature of a mediator's communicative position (Karnozova, 2013). Along with the communicative competence, the following competencies are also required: 1) ***informational and analytical competence*** (defining of the essence and the reasons of the problem; acquisition and structuring of information about the conflict; information reliability, evaluation of facts, etc.); 2) ***mnemic competence*** (remembering of the peoples' names, large amount of information, non-structured information); 3) ***emotional competence*** (maintaining of a positive atmosphere, controlling and reflecting of feelings and emotions, maintaining of proper conduct in the relationships among the parties, etc.; 4) ***management competence***

(motivation of the mediation participants towards the resolution of the conflict, planning and implementation of the mediation process, ensuring of the decision taking, etc.) (Bojko, 2011).

Competencies mutually complement one another and work in aggregate. Therefore, the mediation competence is a part of the professional competence of a teacher.

Methodology

The empirical research was carried out in various Latvian cities and counties (Aluksne, Daugavpils, Gulbene, Jelgava, Jekabpils, Liepaja) during the mediation studies within a social integration project "Improving of Social Life Quality – Alternative Dispute Resolution through Mediation". This, previously unpublished study, involved school students (181), teachers (191) and parents (148). 6-11 form students participated in the questionnaire survey, made by author of this article), while parents were engaged based on voluntary principle. In total, 520 respondents participated in the research. The aim of the questionnaire is to figure out the opinion of the respondents about their involvement in conflict solving and the practicability of such involvement, observing the principles of mediation and implementation of the mediation methods. Each group of the respondents was offered to evaluate the statements related to the obeying of regulations, solving of their own or other people's conflicts, meeting the mediation principles and using the mediation methods. Each target group was offered to consider a number of specially elaborated statements (11 statements for students, 9 statements for teachers and parents) related to conflict solving. Each statement was to be evaluated by one of the possible answers – *"yes"; "rather yes than no"; "rather no than yes";" no"*. Processing the data, the answers *"yes"* and *"rather yes than no"* were summarized as positive answers, while *"rather no than yes"* and *"no"* – as negative answers. The answers acquired were summarized in tables and figures.

Validation of Mediation in School Environment: Empirical Research

Having analysed the data acquired, questions were divided into groups according to the following types: meeting the requirements, obeying the school regulations, solving of personal conflicts and the conflicts of other people, compliance with the mediation principles in conflict solving and implementation of mediation methods.

One of the reasons for conflicts is meeting requirements. Based on this, each group of respondents was asked to evaluate the following statements: students – *"Students in a classroom behave the way a teacher wants them to*

behave"; teachers – *"Students in a classroom behave the way I want them to behave"*; parents – *"Children in everyday life behave the way I want them to behave"*. The data acquired show that 88% of teachers believe that students in a classroom behave the way a teacher wants them to behave, yet the answers of the students differ from the teachers' opinion, as only 62% of respondents believe that students in a classroom behave the way a teacher wants them to behave. Meanwhile, this statement was affirmed by 72% of parents (See Table 3). Statements made by students and teachers are more connected with a school environment, while parents also evaluate behaviour outside of school. Still there is a tendency that mastering the mediation would be useful for all the three parties, because the situations requiring solution either by mutual negotiations or with a support of a neutral person will arise all the time while there is communication.

*Table 3 **Children Meeting the Adults' Behaviour Requirements***

Respondents / possible answers	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
Students	24	88	53	16
	112 (62%)		**69 (38%)**	
Teachers	14	154	21	2
	168 (88%)		**23 (12%)**	
Parents	11	96	37	4
	107 (72%)		**41 (28%)**	

To avoid conflict situations, the aspects of behaviour requirements must be jointly discussed. When the requirements are clear, there are less disputes both within each group and among various groups.

Meeting the school's rules of conduct. Students and teachers spend a part of their lives at school, where the activity is based on the internal rules of conduct. Students evaluated the statement *"I comply with the school's rules of conduct"*, teachers – *"Students comply with the school's rules of conduct"*, parents – *"Children comply with the defined rules of conduct"* (See Table 4). In students' opinion, they comply with the school's rules of conduct (96%). 106 respondents (58.5%) answered *yes*. Only 4% of students answered *rather no than yes*. It can be determined by the fact that the students who participated in the process of studies complied with the rules of conduct defined for them by the school, and also with special aspects of self-assessment by teenagers and youngsters (6-11 form students). The opinion of teachers differed from the students' point of view. Only 8 teachers (4%) believed that students comply with the school's defined rules of conduct, whilst 10.5% of teachers polled gave a negative answer. 16% of parents also think that children do not comply with the requirements defined for them. But the general tendency is that both parents (72%) and teachers

(89.5%) believe that students and children comply with the school's rules of conduct and requirements defined for them. Despite the fact that the majority of answers are positive, there is still something to strive for so that more answers would be *yes*. It means that changes are necessary – both in people and in the environment, they are living.

Table 4 **Complying with the Requirements Defined by the Adults**

Respondents / possible answers	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
Students	106	68	4	3
	174 (96%)		**7 (4%)**	
Teachers	8	163	20	0
	171 (89.5%)		**20 (10.5%)**	
Parents	16	108	22	2
	124 (84%)		**24 (16%)**	

Solving their own disputes. It is important to promote the agemate mediation in school environment. That is why students were asked to evaluate the statement *"I can solve my own disputes"*. Positively answered 93 respondents (51%). In general, 91% of students believe that they can solve their disputes (See Table 5). To continue, it is important to clarify that the level students solve their disputes corresponds to P. Krepper (Krepper, 2012) figure for conflict resolving (individually, with participation of a mediator or third persons). The ideal variant is when the parties can resolve the conflict by themselves, but it is important to make sure that emotions resulting from an unsatisfactory solution are not suppressed and the interests of both parties are met.

Table 5 **Solving Their Own Disputes (Students)**

Respondents / possible answers	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
Students	93	72	16	0
	165 (91%)		**16 (9%)**	

Solving the disputes of the others. As conflicts are a relatively often situation in school environment, it is important not only to look for a solution of your disputes, but also to help the others in resolving their disputes. All the three groups were offered to evaluate the statement in relation to their participation in resolving conflicts of the others. According to the data acquired, 61% of students can solve the disputes arising among their classmates, while 39% of students believe they are not successful in doing that (See Table 6). The data acquired show that students need a support in order to learn resolving both their own conflicts and the conflicts arising among their agemates. Because one thing is to know how

to do it and another thing is to actually do it. Therefore, students need a practical experience in resolving conflicts, which can be acquired during the mediation studies.

Table 6 Solving Disputes among the Classmates

Statements / possible answers (students - 181)	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		Negative answers	
I can solve the disputes arising among my classmates	39	72	53	17
	111 (61%)		70 (39%)	

A teacher's work is connected with conflict solving and a conflictological competence is also the one of a teacher's professional competences, constituting a part of the communicative competence. As it follows from the data acquired, teachers more often participate in conflict solving among the students (88.4%) (See Table 7).

Only 48% of teachers participate in resolving of disputes among other teachers and students and among teachers and parents. The contribution of teachers in resolving of disputes can be very significant, which is also underlined by the teachers themselves (94%), stating that their involvement in resolving of disputes was useful. In its turn, only 48% of teachers participate in resolving of disputes among other teachers and students and among teachers and parents. It can be explained by a number of reasons. During the process of dispute resolution, a number of principles must be obeyed, such as the principle of objectivity, confidentiality etc., which not always can be met in relation to colleagues, parents and students. An important role in conflict solving within school environment and within families belongs to parents. Parents' evaluations of their contribution in resolving of disputes differ as well.

Table 7 Teachers' Contribution to Resolving Disputes

Statements / possible answers (teachers - 191)	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		Negative answers	
I involve into solving of disputes among students	82	87	21	1
	169 (88.4%)		22 (11.6%)	
I involve into solving of disputes among other teachers and students	36	55	77	23
	91 (48%)		100 (52%)	
I involve into solving of disputes among teachers and parents	30	61	67	33
	91 (48%)		100 (52%)	
My involvement in solving of disputes was useful	49	130	11	1
	179 (94%)		12 (6%)	

74% of respondents involve in resolving of disputes among children, and 78% of parents are aware of how disputes arise (See Table 8).

Table 8 ***Parents' Contribution to Resolving of Disputes***

Statements/possible answers (Parents - 148)	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
I involve into solving of disputes among children	40	70	34	4
	110 (74%)		**38 (26%)**	
I involve into solving of disputes among other people	9	30	92	17
	39 (26%)		**109 (74%)**	
I know how the disputes arise	44	72	23	9
	116 (78%)		**32 (22%)**	
My involvement in solving of disputes was useful	30	103	13	2
	133 (90%)		**15 (10%)**	

Parents also understand their contribution to resolving of disputes, stating that their participation in resolving of disputes was useful (90%). Parents rarely involve in resolution of disputes among other people (26%). Therefore, the mediation studies are helpful also for parents in order to promote favourable atmosphere at school and in a family.

As it has been already mentioned, mediation is based on a number of principles – the principle of voluntary participation, the principle of objectivity, confidentiality, neutrality, equal rights, cooperation (See Table 9). Confidentiality is non-disclosure of information. In its turn, the voluntary principle means that the parties participate in resolving of conflict of their own free will. Resolving disputes, teachers try to obey the principle of confidentiality and voluntary participation (72%).

Table 9 ***Obeying the Mediation Principles (Teachers)***

Statements / possible answers (teachers - 191)	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
I obey a confidentiality principle in resolving of disputes	149	41	1	0
	190 (99.4%)		**1 (0.6%)**	
I stick to a voluntary principle in resolving of disputes	42	96	31	22
	138 (72%)		**53 (28%)**	

As experience show, teachers and agemates try to resolve conflicts arising around them. There are teachers who are experts in resolving conflicts and there are teachers who are experts in creating conflicts. Studies are necessary for both

types of teachers. The observance of these principles in school environment has many "but", such as the responsibility for the observance of the principles, how the confidentiality principle is obeyed (how many people know about the conflict), whether a student wants to resolve the conflict (is it always a conflict from the student's point of view), whether a conflict between the administration and a teacher can be resolved in school environment without an intermediary. As it follows from the experience of the authors of the article, in such case it is better to use the assistance of a mediator, as a representative of a supporting personnel or another teacher is subordinated to the head of the educational institution. In this case, a number of principles are not met. A mediator could be a good solution in this case.

In its turn, parents in resolving of disputes try to comply with the principle of neutrality (74%) and objectivity (94%) (See Table 10). It is a very hard task for parents. If parents manage to learn meeting these principles, it can be called the top class of cooperation.

*Table 10 **Obeying the Mediation Principles (Parents)***

Statements / possible answers (Parents - 148)	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
I obey a neutrality principle in resolving of disputes	31	79	31	7
	110 (74%)		**38 (26%)**	
I stick to a principle of objectivity in resolving of disputes	47	92	5	4
	139 (94%)		**9 (6%)**	

Application of the mediation methods. The participants of the questionnaire survey were asked about the application of the mediation methods in resolving of disputes (See Table 11).

*Table 11 **Application of the Mediation Methods in Resolving of Disputes***

Respondents / possible answers	Yes	Rather yes than no	Rather no than yes	No
	Positive answers		**Negative answers**	
Teachers	23	66	18	84
	89 (46.6%)		**102 (53.4%)**	
Parents	15	47	29	57
	62 (42%)		**86 (58%)**	

46.6% of teachers and 42% of parents have used the mediation methods in resolving of conflicts. It means that the studies in this field are necessary for all

the three target groups so that they could acquire the concept of non-violent communication and learn forming a space for a dialogue in searching for a solution.

Conclusions

Mediation is resolving of conflicts by forming a space for a dialogue among the conflicting parties based on the principles of voluntary participation, neutrality, cooperation, confidentiality, objectivity and other principles. Medication can be deemed a new facilitator of communicative culture based on mutual understanding in cooperation among people. It is evidenced by the methodological approaches of mediation – transformative mediation, narrative mediation, understanding-based mediation.

Initially, mediation was used in legal sphere, in business activities, in resolving labour disputes etc. Mediation in USA and European countries is being used from the 80s of the twentieth century. In these countries, the school mediation, including the agemates mediation, has also started to develop. The interest about the mediation started to appear in Latvian education system approximately after 2010, as there were no specialists who could not only provide the techniques (in many schools, psychology was used), but also the theoretical justification and the results of studies, the approaches. In school environment, resolving of conflicts were the responsibility of a social teacher, a psychologist, teachers, curriculum directors, deputy headmasters for curriculum and discipline, head teachers of the form. Now, when the mediation studies for teachers, students, parents and other target groups are organised in our country, our society starts to understand the role of mediation in school environment.

Having summarized the theoretical insights of various scientists, the personal experience of the authors of the article and the results of the empirical research, it can be stated that mediation in school environment promotes forming of favourable psychological atmosphere, obeying of the rights of children, minimisation of mobbing, resolving of conflicts (teachers-teachers, teachers-school administration, student-student, student-teacher, parent-teacher etc.) contributes to the culture of mutual relationships, social skills, changing of habitual conflict solving strategies, forming of critical thinking, enrichment of the study subjects content, respecting of other people etc.

To implement the mediation in school environment, the concept of mediation must be understood. Here we can speak about the mediation or conflictological competence (students, teachers, parents, support personnel, school administration). The mediation competence is a part of the communicative competence and one of the professional competences of a teacher. The mediation competence is an aggregate of knowledge, skills, abilities, psychological aspects

of a personality and personal experience, which is aimed at a constructive resolution of a conflict.

One of the ways of promoting the mediation competence is the mediation studies allowing teachers, students and parents to improve their conflict resolving competence, as only 46.6% of teachers and 42% of parents mentioned them being using the methods of mediation in resolving conflicts. The practicability of such studies is evidenced by the participants' feedback. Students emphasised that every student in the class must have this knowledge, not only two of them. They underlined the knowledge and skills in understanding what a conflict is, how to solve a conflict and how to avoid being involved in a conflict. They stated that this competence is a long-term benefit. The teachers pointed out that it will be useful in both professional activity and in life in general. They mentioned that it is important to create positive communication, to find goods words for students and colleagues. Parents believe that everything they have heard and experienced will improve communication with their children and change the way they used to solve conflicts.

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