The Coexistence Plan at a Secondary School: Analysis Based on the Voices of Students and Teachers

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to analyse the Plan for Coexistence at a Spanish Secondary School and its implementation from the perspective of an inclusive model of school management. Beginning with a theoretical review of different national and international contributions centred on inclusive education and the improvement of school coexistence, we have chosen a qualitative methodology that will enable us to listen and to give a voice to the main members of the school community: students and teachers. We show how the Citizenship Plan follows an inclusive focus, enhancing the participation of the whole community in the different activities that it proposes and how these activities influence student learning. We therefore follow international patterns for inclusive education: culture, politics, and educational practice. As a result, an improvement in the participation of the school community improves the school atmosphere. This participation should be brought about in an efficient and active way, not only by informing, but also by actually taking part in the educational project of the students and in its social setting.

Keywords

Coexistence, Inclusion, Participation, Inclusive Cultures, Qualitative Research, Semi-Structured Interviews

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Introduction

An increasing challenge for education in all countries relates to the provision of quality education that is "inclusive". A fundamental human right in itself, it is the basis on which social cohesion is reached (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017; Park, Dimitrov, & Park, 2018; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Over recent years, many educational systems have promoted "inclusive" education (Abbas, Zafar, & Naz, 2016; Robinson, 2017). It is based on criticism of special education inspired by the streaming of students, due to presumed weaknesses. Divided by different institutions (Jackson, Kate, & Tara, 2013; Szmukler, 2017; Wilson, 2004), the scientific debate has deepened, moving toward the inclusive concept of education or education for all (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Fisher, 2007; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). A terminological change that brings us to talk of the integration of inclusion, conceptualizing the term from more productive educational approaches that distance themselves from failure-based theories and that are centred on the effectiveness of inclusive schools for everybody (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Waitoller & Artiles, 2016).

Dialogic learning falls within the scope of a communicative approach to education as a possible alternative response to the current information society, multiculturalism, and the

dialogic changes that societies are experiencing (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008; Bertau & Tures, 2017; Bjuland & Helgevold, 2018). If one wishes to avoid a state of permanent conflict in a complex society, it becomes increasingly important to be able to negotiate and to reach consensus.

We have to instill in our students the need to develop certain skills that are essential to the times in which we live. Active listening and emotional management skills are becoming a necessity, in order to create an appropriate climate within the school, while other resources, such as educational mediation, form a part of the students' normal practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Fried, Mansfield, & Dobozy, 2015; González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2017; Park et al., 2018; Robinson, 2017).

It especially relevant that particular importance be attached to coexistence plans that are adopted at educational centres, as the measures, rules and actions to be followed by the educational community should be reflected in them. The coexistence plan and its statements, which have not traditionally been applied in the area of teaching, because of their fundamentally theoretical nature, are turned into a fundamental opportunity and tool to establish comprehensive frameworks for actions shared by students, teachers, and families alike (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Robinson, 2017).

It is therefore necessary to be aware of the underlying obligatory nature where everybody is pulling in the same direction. The establishment of protocols on co-existence is devoid of all sense when solely directed at students or when principally applied with a disciplinary approach, but with hardly no socialization. It is more enriching to integrate them in protocols for action that develop the responsibility of the people that they involve, so that those people are aware of co-existence and accept it (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). In this sense, instituting methodological and educational processes such as discussion sessions, interactive groups, and learning communities have demonstrated greater involvement of the families in educational processes, a high commitment towards educational innovation and a strong involvement with the educational centre and its identity (Butler & Christofili, 2014).

Under this approach, the coexistence plans have to be drafted as one of the basic pillars that uphold the way of life at educational centres, so that they are understood as places in which, as well as receiving daily classes, values are shared and channels of communication and collaboration are established (Löf, 2018; Park et al., 2018). This collaboration has to be based on understanding, empathy and the search for transversal learning. To do so, the coexistence plans have to arise from internal guidelines that serve to highlight the existing cultural potential, thereby encouraging integration at its maximum level and faithfully reflecting the workings of society (Zembylas, 2003; 2012; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). The development of experiences is thereby encouraged from a global perspective that leaves the view of the centre as an isolated entity behind, little-by-little shaping its own culture (Hernández-Bravo, Cardona-Moltó, & Hernández-Bravo, 2017).

If the relevance and interest attached to the preparation of co-existence guidelines within educational centres has already been demonstrated, then bridges will have to be built between the constructs of co-existence and curriculum, in such a way that they will constitute interdependent elements helping to increase levels of scholarly success (Schimmel, 2009).

Aims

The aims of this study are: (1) to analyse the Plan for Coexistence at a state secondary school in Spain from the perspective of both students and teachers; (2) to understand the influence of social, cultural, and family contexts on the evolution of the Plan for Coexistence;

and, (3) to draw up a proposal for improvements to the Plan for Coexistence within the school.

The authors of this study work as university lecturers and researchers. From the beginning in the profession, we have been very interested in analyzing crucial educational issues, such as inclusion, prejudice, feelings, values, choices, professional relationships between students and teachers, and professional identity. In this study, we center our interest towards the students through the implication of teachers and the communication of values such as equality, active involvement, inclusion and respects.

Methodology

González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal (2017) point out that educational research is not aimed at producing knowledge on teaching and on teachers, but for teaching and students and with teachers and students. For this reason, and in order to address the research questions, we employed a qualitative research design. As Patton (2002) claims, qualitative methods allow the researcher to study in greater depth and detail issues within specific settings presented in our research. The qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews, allowed us flexibility for probing questions to obtain more in depth and comprehensive data (González-Calvo & Fernández-Balboa, 2018; González-Calvo, Varea, & Martínez Álvarez, 2019; Patton, 2002).

Participants

In all, a total of seven students in the third year of Obligatory Secondary Education Course (also known as ESO) participated together with six teachers from the school (four 3rd-year ESO class teachers, one head of studies, and one psychologist-counsellor).

Purposeful sampling was used for the selection of the participants (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011) within a 100-km radius from the researchers' home base. In order to recruit students and teachers representative of the Spanish educational system, only those students who have taken at least three courses of Obligatory Secondary Education Course, and teachers with a minimum of five years of job experience were invited to participate.

Table 1. Participants

Students	Seven 3rd-year ESO students
Teachers	Four 3rd-year ESO class teachers One head of studies One psychologist from the counselling team

Data Collection

Data collection begun shortly after the participants agreed to participate in the study by signing a consent form. The data in this study emerged from 13 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 50 and 90 minutes. The interviews took the form of informal conversations, in which the lead researcher encouraged the participants to go into detail on research-related matters in non-structured conversations (Smith, 2010).

All conversations were undertaken at the school, at times chosen by the interviewees and were recorded in audio and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent to those taking part who, in the final instance, decided if they wanted the content of their interview to form a part of the research or not, and whether they wanted further clarification on something

they had said. Some of the key questions in the study were as follows: *"Do you think the educational community's participation and involvement are important in school activities?"; "Is it both important and feasible to allow students to take part in school activities?"; "What is the role of cooperation between teachers in the planning and monitoring of the Plan for Coexistence?"; "How are the conflicts that arise at school handled?"; and, "What is the procedure when establishing the rules for coexistence in the school?"*

Ethical clearance was gained through the University of Valladolid (Spain), with prior and informed consent given in writing and signed by all participants. In order to encourage free and open narratives about these topics, the participants chose the time and place of the encounters and were warranted anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

We used Atlas 6.0, a qualitative research analysis programme, in order to organize and encrypt the data. All information gathered was examined using thematic content analysis (Libarkin & Kurdziel, 2002) and constant data comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The thematic content analysis focused on the identification of common patterns among the interviews. Transcripts were first read various times, in order to gain a general sense of the meaning behind the words of all interviewees. The subject areas and categories were identified through the results of this data analysis. The subject areas that emerged from the first analysis were critically examined by the researchers using reflective dialogue, which included interpretations discussed by the researchers, for example, perceived meanings and key phrases uttered by interviewees (Dale, 2000).

The credibility of the research was ensured through ongoing feedback and participative analysis of the researchers as they analysed the data and the categories began to emerge, ensuring that the findings could be considered both credible and reliable (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Results

In teaching practice, many problems are frequently found when working on aspects of both co-existence and inclusion in lessons and on continuity in the classroom. The teaching process is in practice more enhancing and complex than the contents of its theoretical foundations. Hence, the aim in this paper is to give a voice to the real protagonists of the educational process -teachers and students- in order to comprehend the reality that is under study. The research results were grouped together into three large blocks: (1) Results from secondary school teachers; (2) Results from students; and (3) Towards the creation of more inclusive educational cultures.

Results from Secondary School Teachers

The objective of conducting this discussion group was to gather direct information on the points of view of a group of teachers from the centre, in relation to co-existence, learning and the processes of participation at the educational centre.

The first reflection looked at the participation and the involvement of the educational community in school activities. There was no clear agreement among teachers regarding this aspect. Everybody mentioned the lack of joint participation in school activities, although some did not recognise the need to have one clear, single common aim as a school, nor did they see its importance.

> Only the interested parties are asked, not the educational community in general. The process would be something like, "What's the point of this?" (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

There seems to be a widespread belief that a group of people can achieve the best possible results when one of its members is committed to a project on an individual basis, possibly motivated by personal interests, and is then joined by other group members. However, there is no prior and joint reflection as to whether this is a project that we want to develop as a group, first establishing certain targets that we wish to meet. It was also said that, although there might be agreement over establishing certain aims and values from a theoretical standpoint, it would in practice be unthinkable to do so at a state secondary school.

> It works better when someone else is doing all the heavy lifting, as they say. You don't start by asking the sectors involved, but rather you put an idea forward, go to the people you need and draw up a project. (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

The dissenting voice of the school psychologist points to other educational realities – the idea was indeed possible and in fact was being put into practice. He cited something that happened in the school during the past academic year, in order to justify his argument.

> For example, three or four years ago there was a review of the school's documents […]. I give you something I've prepared and you add something. However, us teachers did not even make the effort to check what was on the paper. After all, what could we contribute? (Psychologist-counsellor)

As far as the idea of all the teachers suggesting activities in such a way that all students could take part in them was concerned, the teaching staff felt that it was difficult to put into practice. Differences in age, ability and educational level, among other factors, make it complicated to set up activities in which everybody can participate.

> The teachers sometimes suggest different activities, above all for the last day of term before the Christmas and summer holidays. However, it is very difficult to undertake such activities at a school with so many students and such a wide range of skills, ages and interests. (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

Thus, we are approaching an understanding of the importance of cooperation between teachers. They do not see themselves as a group that is used to teamwork.

> This is slightly more the case at a departmental level, where you can introduce an activity and maybe it has more of an influence on you… We don't always give our support when things get organized, you often hear people saying "Oh, there's a school trip, that's going to mess up my classes because that group is going to be away at those times." (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

The approach to handling conflicts that arise in the school is another key point in the teachers' discourse:

> I see how a number of agents... I often believe there to be many actions, which, organizationally, as structures, are shared out by heads of studies,

> every time they're in the classroom with the whole group. Later in tutorials as well, each teacher gets involved in the conflicts that they come across individually with each student. (psychologist-counsellor)

As far as school reception and welcoming procedures are concerned, the teachers did not feel welcomed. What procedures there were tended to be fairly cold, with scant and repetitive information. They thought that the welcome that the students received was better, given that they were introduced to students from the coexistence team, which they rated quite positively. With regard to the part of the procedure relating to knowing and showing the school's facilities, the teachers felt that this was in the hands of department colleagues. All of this has a negative repercussion on the formation of an idea of the school.

> In comparison with my previous school in a major city, I saw a big difference in terms of the way that I was received as a new teacher at the school. (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

Teachers felt that the extra meetings made coexistence with colleagues easier, as it gave them a chance to become acquainted with their colleagues in different situations outside the school. They agreed that the establishment of links between the teaching staff offered aspects of work that should be done together.

> I have a greater connection with the Philosophy and History department because it's my department and because we share the same space, than I do with others, and that's because for fifty minutes every week we sit together and talk. (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

They took the view that the students, even those classified as "conflictive," see the school as *their* place, somewhere they feel at home, looked after and valued. This feeling led them once again to suggest that the welcoming procedures for students be taken more seriously than they are for teachers.

> The children are really happy, they come into the school year with strong ties between them thanks to these afternoon activities. It is a space in which I think they feel really at home. (3rd-year ESO class teacher)

> Even the problematic students feel welcomed and listened too. (psychologist-counsellor)

When they went on to talk about the learning process, there were once again differences in opinions among the teachers. They felt that some students did not take part in the same activities as much as their other colleagues, so much so that they considered that their educational programming might not be a coherent, well thought out work process. They took the view that they were working without a common course of action that is focused on overarching learning objectives.

Results from Students

> As far as the participation of the educational community in school activities was concerned, the two groups of students coincided in the view that it was fairly low. They felt that few activities were programmed, although they later recognised that they had liked some

parts, mainly those relating to sports and cultural activities. These programmes, many of which were scheduled during school times, were aimed at all students who wanted to take part.

> This year we've only been on one school trip. (3rd-year ESO student)

> There have been very few school trips. […] It's true, there were some activities we liked, like the football tournament, the concerts and the theatre. (3rd-year ESO student)

They felt that the important things that had to be resolved in the school only took into account the opinions of the teachers, without anybody listening to them. They said that they would like to have greater representation, more say in decision-making, as this would make everyone feel more satisfied.

> Just the teachers. That's how it always is. It's like they decide everything. (3rd-year ESO student)

The relationships that are established between the various members of the educational community were seen as working on different terms, depending on the individual personalities.

> It depends on the teacher […] and the student. (3rd-year ESO student)

As far as their reception at the school, the students interviewed thought it was a well organised process, that they felt welcomed by all the members of the school. However, they also understood that it was a long process, one which took time and which could sometimes result in feelings of helplessness.

> When I started at the school, the first few days everything was great. After a while, I started to feel a bit lonely. (3rd-year ESO student)

In answer to the question of whether the school sought to ensure that everyone took part in everything, their feeling was that not enough was done.

> Sometimes they only pick the best ones for a certain thing, they don't open up activities to everybody equally, some students have more opportunities than others. (3rd-year ESO student)

Students took the view they were not kept abreast of school programmes, when they were coming up, but it did not bother them. Some activities were easier to find out about than others, with students hearing about them through their classmates.

In the case of conflicts between the students, they were most concerned about those that remained under the surface, unseen, and unresolved. Many of these conflicts arose on and were fuelled by social media. In general, the students thought that theirs was not a school where there were too many problems among them. However, they thought that the conflict resolution structures, such as the school's group of mediators, were not very visible and that they hardly participated in the active life of the school.

> At the end of the day, they're students just like us, but no one takes as much notice of them as they would take of a teacher, who has more authority. (3rd-year ESO student)

One clear way of taking part in school life is the establishment of class rules through a consensus of all present in the class. However, the two groups of students that were consulted agreed that this was not the case at their school, or if it was done, it tended to be on a one-off basis.

> They don't take the students' opinions into account. They hardly ever ask for our help when drawing up school rules on coexistence. (3rd-year ESO student)

They also feel that the school does not reach out to their parents to discuss matters regarding their children's learning, nor do they ask their opinion on how to improve coexistence or educational success. They only meet them to let them know of the negative aspects regarding their children's behaviour.

> At the meetings, they don't tell you what things you should be working on, they only talk about how bad the students are at school. (3rd-year ESO student)

Finally, we thought it might be interesting to find out the students' opinions on the relationship between the school and the community. We wanted to see whether the resources in the neighbourhood and surrounding areas are made available to students through the school, whether they were informed of their existence and possible activities or projects. In general, they felt that information was scant or even non-existent, and that they had to find out about activities through other students.

> We don't get this kind of information, you have to find out for yourself. I suppose they think we are old enough now get this information for ourselves. (3rd-year ESO student)

> There is a teacher who often talks to us about cultural activities taking place near the school and in the city in general. […] I'm really thankful for this kind of information. (3rd-year ESO student)

Towards the Creation More Inclusive Cultures and Policies at the Educational Centre

In this dimension, the aim is to create the necessary conditions, so that all the students are assured the best of learning and participation. In other words, to reflect on the policies of the educational centre to reduce and to eliminate the barriers to both learning and participation that any student from the same centre may encounter. To do so, a further two sub-sections are presented: (a) organizing support to attend to diversity; and (b) progressively create more inclusive practices at the educational centre.

a. Organizing support to attend to diversity

In the centre in this study, attention to diversity is understood as those measures that are organized to give an educational response to those students who have special characteristics. It proposes constant discussions and the identification of lack of agreement between the teaching team and the actions that are adopted.

With those students that the teachers consider more complicated, some of the teachers that participated in the discussion find that they repeat the same actions time and time again, due to lack of coordination, lack of information, lack of planning… in short, they find themselves improvising actions, without having a clear horizon towards which to go forward.

> I haven't been able use the experience of colleagues, other than specifically here perhaps, in this meeting, with one of them who had already given the class before. (Teacher-tutor 3rd year ESO)

They therefore set out the need for planned proposals, infusing them with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

> If we invoiced this, the number of hours that its coordination has involved, it would be a lot of money. (Director of studies)

No clear working objectives were established with those students who belong to the Programme of Compensatory Education, which is considered as a group with which it is difficult to develop teaching work. One of the possible explanations that is attributed to this fact is continued absence from the classroom in question, spending practically the whole school day in support classes.

One possible solution to this situation, in our opinion, might be a change of classroom methodology, moving towards more participative and collaborative scenarios (Feiler, 2010; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Ozder, 2011). Moreover, the grouping of students is done in a homogeneous way, providing these students with support outside of their ordinary classrooms, grouped by level of curricular competence. This type of classroom organization is at present understood as an exclusive measure (Includ-ED, 2009; 2011), which offers differentiated responses to each one of the students, but without obtaining the results that were in principle proposed.

b. Progressively create more inclusive practice at the educational centre

Beginning with all the information under analysis, we even go so far as to assert that inclusive educational practices function at the centre, driving improvements to co-existence, but under the individual initiatives of specific people.

> In reality, it's the specific action of the two people in charge of the bilingual French section, they're the two specific people, or perhaps three, two people who are in charge of the choir, two people in charge of the question of the compensatory classes… the question of co-existence. (Teacher-tutor 3rd year ESO, 15th April 2015)

The teachers from the centre considered that there are many activities that encourage the participation of students, whether physical education, music or those others that at the same time promote the development of the linguistic competence of the students (theatre group, activities proposed by the language department …)

> You have children there from… from the 2nd year of the sixth form to the 1st year of ESO, co-existing in a choir, at very different ages, with very different issues, boys from very heterogenous social classes and social groups and there

they are, co-existing in a quite remarkable manner. (Psychologist-student advisor)

Nevertheless, as personal initiative is behind their personal development, these teachers have no guiding thread that gives them greater coherence and meaning for the students. Considering this point as one of the most important ones to infuse meaning into everything that is done, through the interconnection of plans and activities (de Vicente, 2010), small-scale experiences have sprung up that constitute a starting point for their subsequent analysis and inclusion in the policies and programmes of the educational centre.

The culture of work that is developed at the centres of Secondary Education to a great extent introduces difficulties in the development of practical inclusive proposals. Some of the possible causes that we might even suggest on the basis of the data we have gathered could be the lack of a culture of collaboration between professionals belonging to the teaching staff and the excessive bureaucratization of the proposals, which discourages some groups of teachers from greater involvement and participation.

With regard to the participation of families, it is interesting to point out in support of the views offered by the members of the parent-teachers association, who collaborated in the discussion group, that attendance at the first meeting of tutors with the families was, throughout the academic year, very poor in some groups (only one or two families turned up).

However, we would like to point out that following the classification proposed by the Includ-ED Project (2009; 2011), the type of participation that is offered to families of this centre forms part of the two first categories (informative or consultive), which are the ones that contribute least to the improvement of scholarly success among the students, and to the consolidation of community participation at educational centres.

Finally, we consider that a possible cause that provokes it may be situated in the process of transmitting the information. It is passed to the students, who have to pass it on to their parents or guardians, but if not done, and if the parents never attend the institute, the information is lost in an incessant loop.

Discussion

As has been reflected in our investigation, it is essential that a degree of participation is forthcoming from the whole educational community -students and teachers, principally- for the consolidation of a good general climate of the centre. Good participation improves the educational success of students and improves co-existence at the centre. When we speak of participation, we refer to participation that includes all voices of the community in an effective and active way, not only informing on the actions to be carried out, but also forming part of the social and educational project of the students at the educational centre and its setting.

Throughout the work, some of the details of this conceptual tension between co-existence, participation and educational success have been described. In this way, we understand that the educational centre seeks to establish structures that manage the conflicts arising within the academic context, with the direct participation of the students -the so-called teams of mediation, in which the student is the true protagonist-, and through permanent training of the students and teachers, thanks to the participation in different training seminars.

Nevertheless, it is confirmed that inclusive educational practices exist linked to concrete experiences developed in an individual way by some of the teachers or groups of teachers at the educational centre. Some of them have a very greater potential, but they are not turned into generalized practices. Various causes have been pointed out as possible motivators of such success, at the same time as the concerns that this success provokes

among some of the teaching staff of the centre. These concerns are raised as a key point for starting up a process of improvement.

We have been able to confirm that, in general, there is no common culture of the centre expressed in a series of policies that guide the process to be followed, turning it into a standard that sets out what to do and at what time to do it, so that no practices are developed in the classrooms that provoke the well-being of the students and their scholarly success.

In this case, we believe that the educational institution has to be capable of creating the culture of the centre, employing for that purpose the powerful specific practices previously developed in this way. However, the proposals relating to inclusion, training and of an educational nature that have been introduced at educational centres over recent years must be highlighted, as they are still not of sufficient depth and impact at a social level (Marín-Díaz & Sampedro, 2016). In addition, it would be appropriate to establish platforms, means of diffusion and educational legislation that support the success of these practices and that can in this way be shared by other educational communities and by families (Fletcher, 2016; González-Calvo & Fernández-Balboa, 2018). Only when the teaching practices of educational centres are shared through active and interdisciplinary participation can they be replicated, improved and socially valued, helping to remove the habitual tensions between teachers and students (Bjuland & Helgevold, 2018; Bourassa & Margonis, 2017). Hence, it is senseless if the students are unaware of the progress that these co-existence plans imply for the centre, something that happens in the majority of cases, for which reason the feeling of full participation in the improvements is lost. Some experiences have demonstrated that student involvement in activities arising from the co-existence plans of the centre have improved their scholarly performance, their self-esteem, and the capability to counter oppressive and reproductive education (Cammarota, 2017). We recall once again that this aspect situates itself as one of the fundamental characteristics of inclusive education (Abbas et al., 2016; Ainscow et al., 2006; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Waitoller & Artiles, 2016). If this collaboration within a centre is key for the advancement of the educational community in one and the same direction, it is ever more so if collaborative networks with other entities are generated, which permit the exchange of experiences.

As a final conclusion, we can point out that the centre walks slowly towards greater participation with the principal agents of the educational process (staff and teachers), without losing sight of the very important stretches of the road that are still to be travelled down.

Although we are aware of the limitations of our investigation, it is possible that this work can continue defining itself towards the practice of a co-existence plan applied and implemented through an inclusive perspective.

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