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DESATANDO NUDOS: UN CAMINO COMPARTIDO PARA TRANSFORMAR LA CONVIVENCIA ESCOLAR

UNTYING KNOTS: A SHARED JOURNEY TOWARDS TRANSFORMING SCHOOL LIFE

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Resumen
Este artículo muestra un programa sobre convivencia escolar implantado en un centro concertado de Salamanca que supera el enfoque punitivo mediante el fortalecimiento del vínculo afectivo entre docentes y alumnado, la incorporación del aprendizaje socioemocional y el uso de la mediación y las prácticas restaurativas como herramientas prioritarias para la gestión de los conflictos. Implementado durante cuatro años en la etapa de ESO y Bachillerato, el programa se ha estructurado en cuatro fases: diagnóstico, formación, implementación

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ISSN 1886-5895

acompañada y evaluación. A través de un camino compartido por toda la comunidad educativa, este programa, basado en la responsabilidad, el diálogo y la reparación del daño, promueve un cambio cultural de centro que posiciona al docente como mediador y generador de vínculos educativos humanizadores. Los resultados obtenidos evidencian que la propuesta es replicable y sostenible en otros colegios y confirman que apostar por este tipo de metodologías en la convivencia escolar contribuye a que los centros educativos sean espacios donde aprender, convivir y crecer como personas.

Palabras clave: *Convivencia escolar; aprendizaje socioemocional; mediación escolar, prácticas restaurativas; vínculos educativos de apego seguro.*

Abstract

This article presents a programme on school cohesion implemented at a semi-private school in Salamanca, which moves beyond a punitive approach by strengthening the emotional bond between teachers and pupils, incorporating social-emotional learning, and using mediation and restorative practices as key tools for conflict management. Implemented over four years at secondary and sixth-form level, the programme has been structured in four phases: assessment, training, supported implementation and evaluation. Through a shared journey involving the entire educational community, this programme—based on responsibility, dialogue and making amends for harm—promotes a cultural shift within the school that positions teachers as mediators and creators of humanising educational bonds. The results obtained demonstrate that the approach is replicable and sustainable in other schools and confirm that adopting this type of methodology to foster harmonious school life helps to ensure that educational institutions are places where pupils can learn, live together and grow as individuals.

Keywords; *School life; Social and Emotional Learning; school mediation; restorative practices; secure attachment in educational relationships.*

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ISSN 1886-5895

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching has evolved over the years and has become an increasingly demanding profession in a society undergoing ever more rapid change. We live in a context of continual growth, accelerating change and relentless pressure to innovate, with little time to reflect on experience or anticipate what lies ahead. Against this background, supporting adolescents through this stage of life has become increasingly complex because of the impact their surroundings have on their emotional development.

Teaching today entails more than motivating pupils and imparting knowledge: it also involves providing emotional support to pupils and their families and helping them manage emotional challenges. This highlights the need to review and update pedagogical practice, adopting approaches and programmes that support pupils' social and emotional development and, by extension, the wellbeing of all those who interact with them in everyday school life.

This need is recognised in Organic Law 3/2020 of 29 December (LOMLOE), which identifies the following learning objectives within the profile pupils are expected to achieve by the end of compulsory education (Jefatura del Estado, 2020):

– **Develop a critical, empathetic and proactive outlook** in order to identify inequality and exclusion and understand their complex underlying causes.

– **Recognise conflict** as an inherent part of social life that must be resolved **peacefully.**

– Critically examine and make use of the opportunities offered by contemporary society, particularly digital culture, assessing their benefits and risks and **using them ethically and responsibly to improve individual and collective quality of life.**

– Embrace uncertainty as an opportunity to devise more creative responses while learning **to manage the anxiety** it may entail.

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ISSN 1886-5895

– **Cooperate and live** alongside others in open, changing societies, valuing personal and cultural diversity as an asset and taking an interest in other languages and cultures.

– Feel part of a **collective endeavour** at both local and global levels, developing **empathy and generosity.**

Integrating cognitive and emotional dimensions must therefore form part of a renewed understanding of education, one in which supportive relationships enable pupils to develop the capacities needed to interpret the complex world around them. Education should transmit not only knowledge but also values, ways of acting and frameworks for understanding and managing emotions.

As noted above, the world is changing rapidly, creating tensions between established educational models and wider social developments. In particular, the gap between teachers' pedagogical and communication approaches and adolescents' interests and ways of behaving is becoming increasingly apparent. This acceleration also makes generational differences more pronounced. Gaps once associated with grandparents and grandchildren are now evident between parents and children. Nor are such differences confined to families: they also arise between teachers and learners, and even between generations of teachers. Understanding the interests of different generations, particularly young people, is therefore essential to building relationships and, wherever possible, reducing intergenerational conflict.

Adolescence is also a complex developmental period characterised by physical, emotional, social and intellectual changes. Adolescents challenge authority as they establish their identity and independence. In everyday interactions at school, this process can lead to teacher frustration and, increasingly, discouragement in carrying out their professional responsibilities.

Recent studies indicate that many young people who experience difficulties with interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation may encounter persistent problems when they and their families do not receive support tailored

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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to their needs. These difficulties may hinder their adjustment to adult responsibilities and continue to affect their future social and emotional relationships.

There is therefore a clear need for **educational approaches and alternatives** that support effective teaching and positive school relationships while responding to the social and emotional needs of both pupils and their families.

Untying Knots (Desatando Nudos) offers one possible methodological response to the interpersonal difficulties experienced by adolescents and their families, while also helping teachers develop their Teacher Emotional Competence. Grounded in secure attachment relationships, social and emotional learning, mediation and restorative practices, the programme seeks to establish supportive relationships that help untie the emotional knots that life creates for members of the school community.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The programme aims to weave a new emotional fabric within school communities as the foundation for a positive school climate. To achieve this, it draws on the theoretical perspectives outlined below.

2.1. SECURE ATTACHMENT AS A FOUNDATION FOR PUPILS' LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Attachment theory offers teachers a clear framework for becoming reliable sources of security for their pupils. This programme seeks to show that warm, approachable and welcoming teacher–pupil relationships can improve emotional wellbeing, help pupils develop healthier internal working models of relationships and enhance academic performance.

This theoretical perspective changes how we interpret one of the most challenging issues teachers encounter: challenging behaviour. Rather than viewing disruption simply as defiance, an attachment-informed approach to emotional regulation understands maladaptive behaviour as a possible expression of unmet emotional needs. This allows for more compassionate responses that help rebuild

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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ISSN 1886-5895

healthy teacher–pupil relationships, even when those relationships have been damaged.

Four attachment patterns are generally distinguished: secure attachment and three insecure patterns—avoidant, anxious–ambivalent and disorganised attachment.

Following Guerrero (2023), teachers need to demonstrate the following qualities if pupils are to experience them as secure attachment figures.

–Protection and safety. These arise from the teacher's caring, relational and reassuring approach and provide the foundation of secure attachment relationships. A sense of safety is essential for the other qualities to develop.

–Autonomy. This means enabling pupils to take an active role in their own learning by stimulating and reinforcing curiosity. Autonomy and protection are closely connected and must be appropriately balanced within secure attachment. Teachers should encourage independence while establishing sensible boundaries that protect adolescents from harm. An absence of either quality may contribute to insecure patterns of attachment.

–Helping pupils make sense of experience. Pupils are often attentive to what they see, hear and perceive but do not always interpret events accurately. Helping them understand their experiences is therefore central to teaching and mediation. It means explaining, in accessible and age-appropriate language, what they are experiencing or feeling and what is happening around them and in the wider world (Guerrero, 2023). This can allow everyone involved to approach conflict with greater openness and understanding.

–Being seen and recognised. Ensuring that pupils feel seen requires attention to three key dimensions:

- Attention: Building high-quality relationships by giving pupils our full attention when they act, speak or share experiences with us.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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- Affection: How we communicate matters as much as what we say. Warmth, care and sensitivity help establish secure attachment relationships.
- Clear rules and boundaries: Teachers must provide safe, positive environments, with clear relational expectations and rules that safeguard pupils' wellbeing.

–Responsiveness. Responsiveness means recognising and responding to pupils' needs, rather than simply satisfying their wishes. It requires teachers to understand pupils' emotional states and offer an appropriate response. This is not always easy in large classes. As noted in the introduction, teachers must therefore make an effort to know their pupils and develop skills in recognising and managing emotional responses.

Finally, attachment-based support is asymmetrical: teachers are responsible for meeting pupils' needs, not the reverse. Attachment relationships must serve the needs of the more dependent person. Teachers, of course, have emotional needs of their own, but pupils should not be expected to meet them. Teachers therefore need sustained emotional self-awareness. If they cannot regulate their own emotions and needs, these may adversely affect their relationships with pupils and contribute to insecurity. Secure relationships with pupils can protect against future problems and conflict by strengthening their capacity to tolerate frustration and stress, make sounder educational and career decisions, regulate their emotions under pressure and adapt across different areas of life.

2.2. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

In his study of Teacher Emotional Competence (TEC), informed by the Emotional Pedagogy Model, Bayón (2023) defines the construct through four interrelated competences: teachers' emotional self-awareness, teachers' emotional self-management, awareness of the classroom's social and emotional dynamics, and emotional management within the classroom. The present programme highlights the need to move beyond exclusively child-centred

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https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

pedagogical approaches. As Bayón argues in his doctoral thesis, a new model should place teacher wellbeing at its centre, recognising it as a factor affecting pupils' wellbeing, meaningful learning and social and emotional development, as well as teachers' own professional wellbeing and vocational development. The considerable emotional demands of teaching mean that teachers require emotional competences beyond those ordinarily needed in everyday life or many other professions. Emotional self-awareness, emotional identification and emotional regulation are therefore essential both for teachers' mental health and for effective classroom practice. Although the development and implementation of TEC warrant detailed examination as foundations of educational quality and improved school climate, this programme particularly emphasises interpersonal and communication skills that support effective interaction and intervention with pupils.

One approach that can help teachers develop TEC in the classroom is **Social and Emotional Learning** (SEL). SEL is an educational approach that develops pupils' ability to understand and manage emotions, establish healthy relationships and make responsible decisions. Drawing on psychology, education and neuroscience, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has played a leading role in systematising SEL as an educational framework. This perspective identifies positive effects of social and emotional skills across several domains:

– Improved academic achievement.

– Reduced stress and anxiety.

– Better interpersonal relationships.

– Greater self-esteem and resilience.

According to this approach, emotions and social interactions shape how pupils learn and relate to others. SEL therefore addresses five core areas: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

SEL should not be confined to a particular subject or timetable slot: it should permeate teaching and everyday school life. Pupils learn not only through explicit instruction in emotional regulation but also by observing how their peers and teachers model emotional responses, problem-solving strategies and interpersonal behaviour. Observational learning is most effective when combined with guided practice and reflection. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) propose the **Prosocial Classroom** model, which encompasses programmes such as Caring School Community. Together with TEC, such approaches strengthen teacher–pupil relationships and support effective SEL. Building on these principles, the programme invites teachers to approach everyday teaching from a different perspective. In literature lessons, pupils might explore characters' emotions; in History, they might engage emotionally with events that have shaped humanity; in Music, they might develop expression through voice and movement; and in Mathematics, they might experience cooperation when solving problems, learn to manage frustration when solutions are difficult and share the satisfaction of reaching a solution together.

To be effective, this work requires collaboration among educators and sustained development beginning in early years education. Main (2023) suggests that every school should have a **social and emotional development team** to share strategies, engage actively in conflict resolution and maintain consistency across classrooms. A collaborative approach ensures that SEL becomes embedded in institutional culture rather than depending on individual teachers' experience. Through regular meetings, such a team could consider questions central to a positive school climate: How do we respond when a pupil struggles with emotional regulation? What language do we consistently use in class? How do we communicate pupils' SEL progress to families? Dialogue between teachers can turn isolated practices into coherent whole-school approaches, strengthening inclusion and responsiveness to pupils' needs.

At the school implementing this programme, as the approach becomes established and more teachers incorporate it into their daily practice, we have

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

found it easier to address one of the situations that most often produces instability and anxiety among staff: conflict. The word "conflict" is commonly associated with negative meanings, perhaps because it is often equated with violence. Although some conflicts lead to violence, violence can also represent a denial of conflict through attempts to eliminate difference, deny another person's humanity and impose a spurious solution by force. Following Schmitz (2018), the programme advocates understanding conflict not as a threat but as an opportunity. When peaceful approaches such as mediation are used, conflict and the process of resolving it can contribute to personal and social growth. Conflict can be a powerful driver of social transformation and maturity: it should be understood not only as a crisis but also as an opportunity.

2.3. MEDIATION AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS: FROM BLAME TO RESPONSIBILITY

Restorative practices are educational approaches aimed at constructive conflict management and the development of relationships within the school community. Based on the principles of restorative justice, they seek to repair harm arising from conflict, foster personal responsibility and restore relationships between those involved.

In educational settings, restorative practices comprise strategies and structured activities that encourage dialogue, empathy and pupils' participation in addressing conflicts in classrooms and across the school. They are rooted in the understanding that conflict can become an opportunity to learn and develop social and emotional competences that support education more broadly (Wachtel, 2016). Strategies proposed in this programme include dialogue or restorative circles, restorative meetings, reparation agreements and restorative conversations between pupils and staff. These approaches allow people to express emotions associated with conflict, understand the impact of their actions and participate in identifying solutions that help repair harm (Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel, 2009).

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

School mediation is another important resource for peaceful conflict resolution. It is a voluntary and confidential process in which people experiencing conflict are supported by an impartial third party—a mediator—who facilitates communication and mutual understanding so that those involved can reach a solution acceptable to everyone (Torrego, 2006).

Mediation may be undertaken by teachers or by pupils who have received appropriate training. Peer-mediation training programmes have produced positive results in terms of responsibility, participation and pupils' involvement in improving school climate (Bosqué, 2003).

Mediation typically comprises several stages: agreeing ground rules, allowing each party to explain their perspective, identifying individual concerns and needs, jointly exploring solutions, and reaching agreements or reconciliation that help resolve the conflict and prevent similar situations.

Restorative practices and school mediation can offer a range of benefits for school relationships. Research suggests that they can improve school climate, reduce conflict and strengthen pupils' sense of belonging (McCluskey et al., 2008).

Teachers may nevertheless encounter resistance or implementation difficulties because these practices require a change in school culture. Rather than focusing solely on sanctions for inappropriate behaviour, they encourage educational responses founded on reflection, responsibility and a commitment to improving interpersonal relationships. Although this is the direction of the programme, it is important to emphasise that Untying Knots neither seeks to replace current legal requirements nor presents itself as an alternative to them. Its purpose is to enrich existing provision and equip teachers with additional educational practices for everyday school life.

3. PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION

Untying Knots was launched in the 2022–2023 academic year at Colegio Santa Teresa de Jesús, a state-funded independent school in Salamanca, and has remained a central framework for school relationships and behaviour across

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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ISSN 1886-5895

compulsory and post-compulsory secondary education up to the present academic year. The following sections outline its design and implementation.

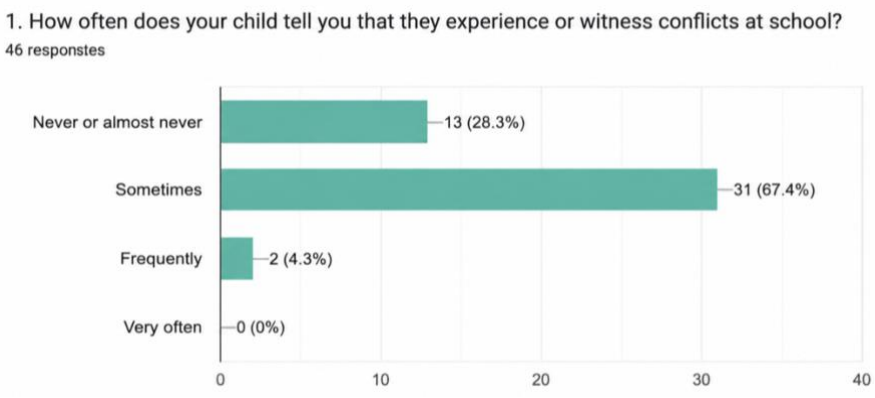
3.1. INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND RELATIONSHIPS

To this end, the school's wellbeing and relationships coordinator convened a team of pupils and teachers to undertake a quantitative and qualitative assessment of relationships and conflict within the school.

Google Forms questionnaires were initially designed and distributed to pupils, families, teachers and administrative and support staff. They explored participants' assessments of the school climate and their views on school mediation and its potential introduction. Findings for each group are summarised below.

FAMILIES. Families expressed concern about conflict, but also a willingness to participate in resolving it. Most considered the school's conflict management broadly positive. However, their most common response when their children encountered conflict was to advise them at home; comparatively fewer approached the school to manage the situation. A substantial proportion viewed the establishment of a mediation team positively and expressed willingness both to undertake training and to participate in mediation.

CHARTS SHOWING RESPONSES TO THE FAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE



Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

Figure 1. Frequency of school conflicts reported by families.

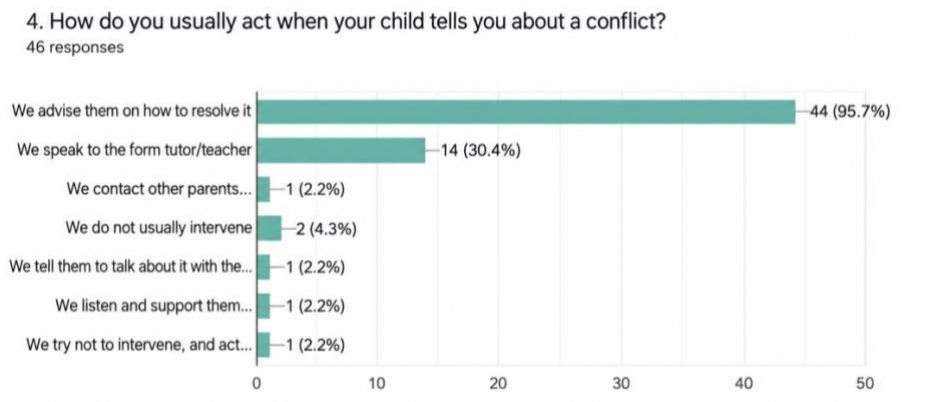


Figure 2. How families respond to conflict.

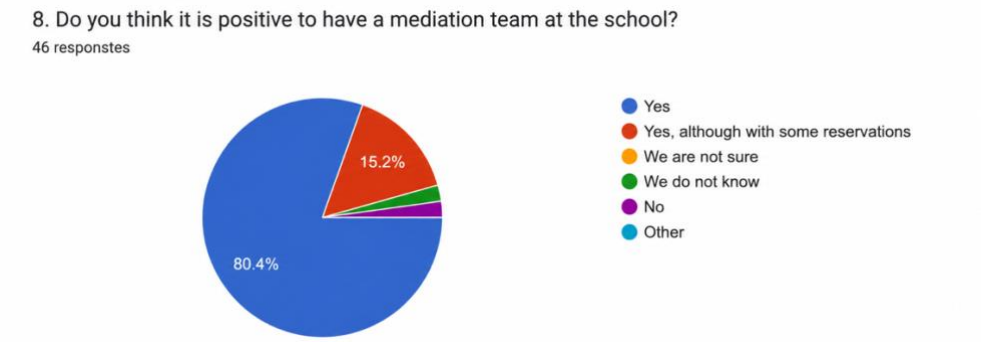


Figure 3. Families' assessment of a school mediation team.

PUPILS. The most frequently reported conflicts were verbal arguments, teasing and disrespectful behaviour between pupils. Incidents involving physical violence were less common, and no formal reports of bullying were recorded. Most pupils considered a mediation team necessary and wished to be involved. Significantly, pupils were most likely to turn to their teachers when conflict arose, followed by their friends. In light of the importance of secure attachment relationships discussed above, this suggests that many pupils already view teachers as potential sources of support, safety and mediation.

CHARTS SHOWING RESPONSES TO THE PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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ISSN 1886-5895

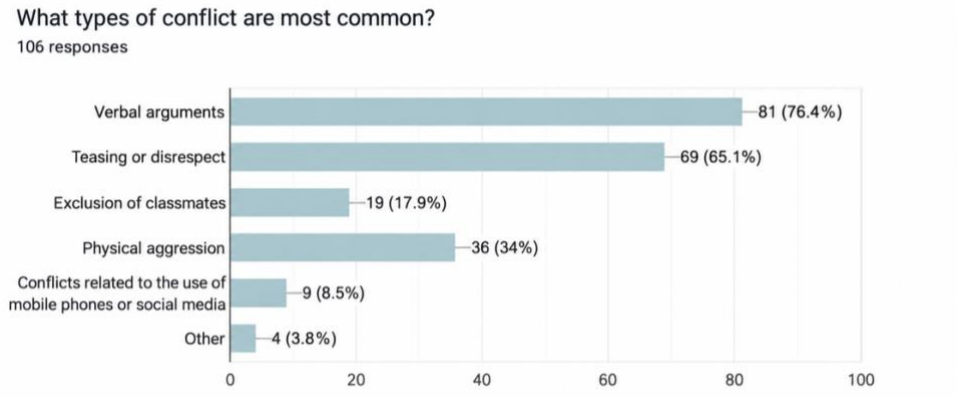


Figure 4. Types of conflict most commonly reported by pupils.

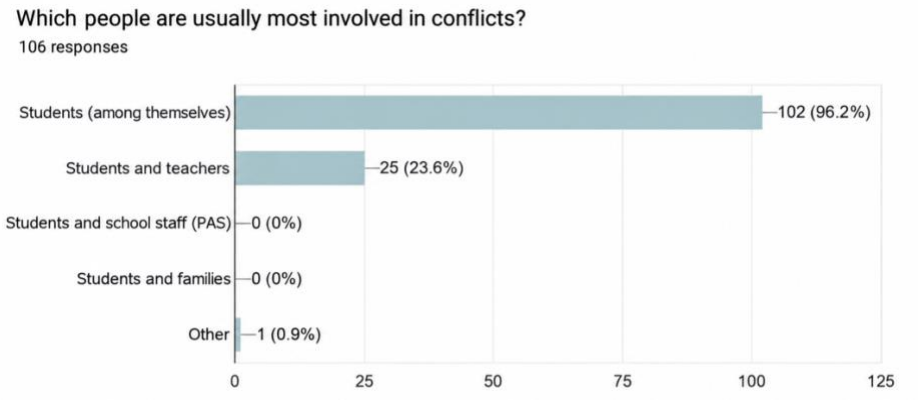


Figure 5. People most commonly involved in conflicts, according to pupils.

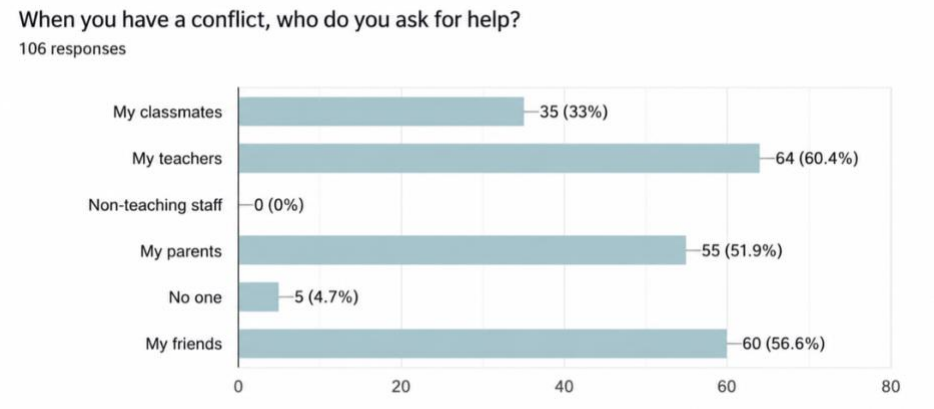


Figure 6. People pupils turn to for help with conflict.

TEACHERS. School relationships and conflict management are matters of concern to staff, although only nine teachers at compulsory secondary level volunteered to complete the questionnaire. They reported observing conflict weekly, most commonly in the playground and then in classrooms. In agreement

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

with pupils' responses, verbal arguments and disrespectful behaviour were the most frequent incidents. Teachers generally favoured dialogue with those involved, although a small minority preferred disciplinary sanctions. Respondents also supported establishing a school mediation team and expressed willingness to undertake training.

CHARTS SHOWING RESPONSES TO THE TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

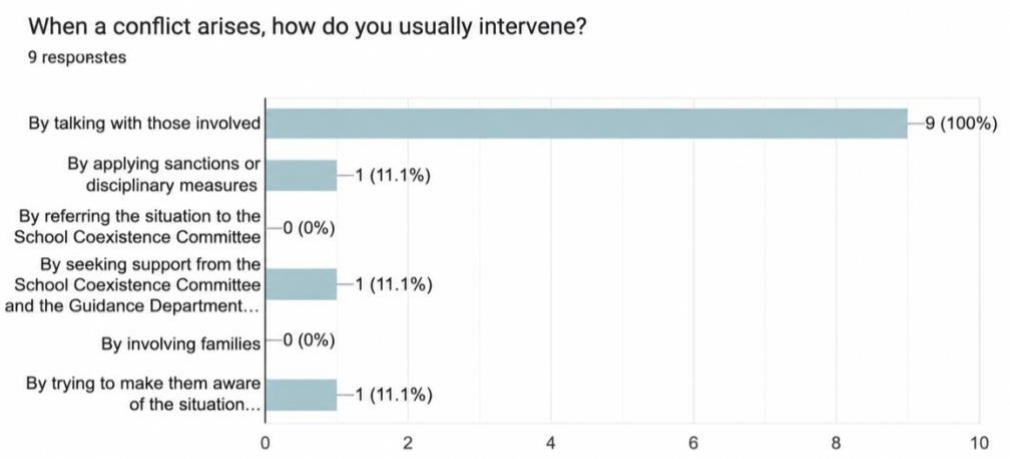


Figure 7. Teachers' responses to conflict.

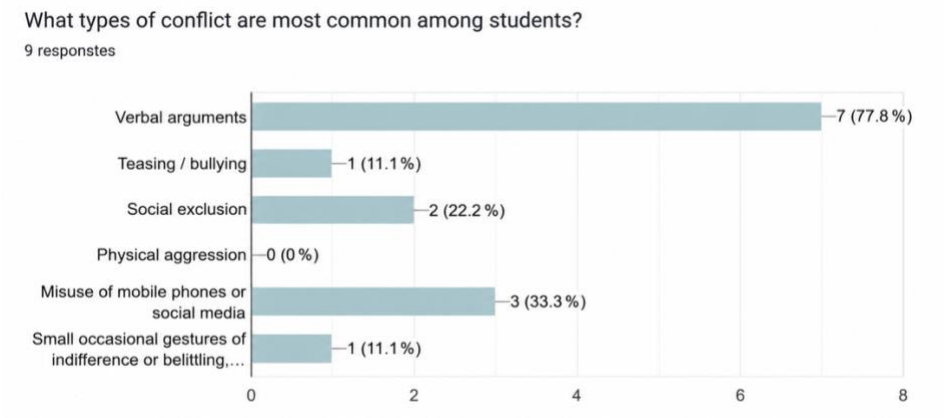


Figure 8. Types of conflict most commonly reported by teachers.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND SUPPORT STAFF. This group reported occasional or weekly conflict, most often in the dining hall and, secondly, in classrooms. Members of staff were willing to receive school-mediation training, although they felt their capacity to intervene in everyday situations was limited by having less contact with pupils than teachers.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

3.2 DEFINING PROGRAMME PRIORITIES AND AREAS OF ACTION

Using the findings and a design thinking approach, the working group held a session to identify the school's priority areas for intervention. These comprised conflict prevention, identification and mediation; individual support for adolescents at risk; and emotional regulation among teachers and pupils.

Following joint reflection by teachers and pupils, the School Relationships Committee, working with the school's Guidance Department, devised the following areas of action:

–Establishing a social and emotional development and mediation team, comprising members of the School Relationships Committee, Guidance Department and selected form tutors.

–Designing and delivering theoretical training and experiential workshops to develop self-awareness, listening, communication, empathy and emotional regulation. This included training for teachers in secure attachment and mediation; workshops for pupils on bullying prevention and restorative practices; and workshops for families on communication with adolescents.

–Establishing procedures for conflict situations, family meetings, restorative and supportive conversations with pupils, and mediation processes.

–Encouraging pupils to play a proactive role in improving school relationships through social transformation projects and the creation of a peer-mediation team.

3.3 TEACHER TRAINING

As explained above, developing Teacher Emotional Competence (TEC) enables staff to contribute more effectively to a positive school climate. The wellbeing and relationships coordinator therefore planned professional development addressing intrapersonal competences (self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, personal commitment and teachers' emotional regulation) and

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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interpersonal competences (supporting pupils' emotional regulation, classroom leadership and management, positive discipline, and relationship and communication skills). Staff evaluated the training positively. It also provided a theoretical grounding in mediation that has helped teachers put these processes into practice. Training has been delivered over three academic years, with further TEC-focused professional development planned.

3.4 SUPPORTED IMPLEMENTATION

Following the training, teachers began applying the programme's approaches in practice. Support included classroom observation, peer review and case analysis by the social and emotional development and mediation team, drawing on cases proposed by teachers themselves. In addition, some subjects have incorporated SEL projects into the curriculum. For example, Art and Music collaborated on a bullying-prevention project that culminated in visual maps displayed in corridors to raise pupils' awareness, alongside a jointly produced music video.

In the 2025–2026 academic year, the first peer-mediation team was established and began training and serving as a source of help within the school. It has played an important role in identifying pupils facing risk or conflict. Members have also delivered short workshops for primary pupils on group cohesion, empathy and communication skills.

3.5 EMBEDDING THE PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL CULTURE AND DEVELOPING A SCHOOL-SPECIFIC MEDIATION PROTOCOL

Throughout implementation, the school's rules and regulations have been reviewed in the light of Untying Knots. This has made interventions more consistent and reduced the divide between restorative approaches and the more punitive style favoured by a small proportion of staff.

Spaces for meeting, dialogue and restoration have also been established. Attending to the setting in which mediation and restorative processes take place encourages pupil participation and openness to dialogue. From the 2026–2027

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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academic year, termly assemblies are planned for teachers and pupils to review the current state of school relationships and propose improvements to the school climate.

School mediation is a particular priority of Untying Knots. We believe that identifying conflict promptly and addressing it effectively through mediation significantly improves interpersonal relationships between pupils and helps prevent bullying. Accordingly, the wellbeing and relationships coordinator and the social and emotional development and mediation team have developed the following school-specific protocol.

PROTOCOL FOR CASES REQUIRING SCHOOL MEDIATION

This school-mediation protocol sets out procedures and guidelines for resolving conflicts between pupils, or between pupils and teachers. It comprises the following stages for "untying the knot" of conflict.

1.-Requesting mediation or identifying conflict. Teachers play a central facilitating role, and a mediation process may arise in three ways. First, pupils may approach a teacher about a conflict. This requires a climate of trust and approachability, underscoring the importance of secure teacher–pupil relationships. Such relationships make it easier for pupils to report conflict or request mediation directly. Secondly, teachers may identify conflict through observation and suggest mediation to those involved. Thirdly, a family may request a meeting to report conflict or risk affecting their child. In such cases, keeping the family informed about the mediation process is essential to reducing anxiety and concern. The mediation record described below includes a section documenting how the conflict was identified.

2.-Selecting mediators. During the programme's initial years, mediation has been facilitated by the wellbeing and relationships coordinator, trained teachers from the social and emotional development and mediation team, and the form tutors of the pupils involved. In the next academic year, once their training is complete, pupil mediators will also begin facilitating mediation. At present, they act

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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as peer supporters, helping to identify and support pupils experiencing conflict or risk. The mediation record documents the mediators involved.

3.-Meetings with those involved in the conflict. The following steps are recommended:

– Individual meetings with each party to identify interests, concerns and requests. At this stage, both parties provide consent for a subsequent joint meeting conducted voluntarily and confidentially.

– A joint meeting with both parties. The following principles are particularly important:

- Establish speaking turns.
- Avoid judgement and seek an objective understanding of events.
- Practise active listening.
- Maintain respect and confidentiality.
- Reframe the conflict to enable constructive communication and dialogue.
- Encourage both parties' willingness to meet.
- Paraphrase each person's account to deepen understanding and maintain objectivity.
- Agree possible actions to bring the conflict to an end and improve relations between those involved.

4.-Agreement and reconciliation. Reconciliation remains the ultimate aim because it can resolve conflict without lingering resentment and reduce the likelihood of recurrence. We believe that forgiveness can bring individuals peace. Where tensions make immediate reconciliation difficult, the parties may instead reach a negotiated agreement. This may include apologies, commitments to change behaviour or other necessary actions. Follow-up provides an opportunity to work towards reconciliation later.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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5.-Meetings with the families of those involved. When a conflict has caused significant emotional harm or might develop into bullying, it is particularly important to meet the families concerned. Explaining the process, helping them understand the emotional difficulties shaping their children's responses, and allowing them to feel heard and ask questions can strengthen mediation. Our experience during implementation suggests that informing and supporting families makes mediation easier and helps prevent parents or carers from independently intervening in ways that may escalate conflict.

6.-Follow-up. Regular follow-up is recommended to review how relationships develop after mediation, provide further support when needed and gather feedback to improve future practice. A Google Forms questionnaire has been designed to evaluate the mediation process and its follow-up.

The following record has been developed to document mediation processes at the school:

MEDIATION CASE RECORD

DATE OF MEDIATION	
HOW WAS THE CONFLICT IDENTIFIED?	
START OF MEDIATION	
MEDIATORS	
MEETINGS WITH THE PARTIES AND THEIR FAMILIES	The following principles should guide this stage of mediation: • Establish speaking turns. • Avoid judgement and seek an objective understanding of events. • Practise active listening. • Maintain respect and confidentiality. • Reframe conflict to encourage constructive dialogue. • Encourage both parties to meet. • Paraphrase accounts to clarify the conflict. • Agree actions to end the conflict and improve relations.
IDENTIFYING THE INTERESTS OF BOTH PARTIES	
DEVELOPING RESTORATIVE OPTIONS	
AGREEMENT OR RECONCILIATION	
DATE MEDIATION CLOSED	
FOLLOW-UP	

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

3.6. DESIGNING AN EVALUATION PLAN TO ASSESS PROGRAMME IMPACT

In evaluating the programme's contribution to school relationships and climate, we have considered not only outcomes but also implementation, adherence to the plan and the experiences of members of the school community.

The following evaluation domains and approaches have been identified.

EVALUATION: *How is the programme being implemented?*

- Check compliance with the implementation timetable.
- Review whether activities follow the planned methodology.
- Assess the actual participation of the different school-community groups.

How has this been evaluated?

- Mediation case records documenting the process followed in each case.
- Attendance and participation records for training activities.
- Training evaluation questionnaires completed by teachers, families and pupils.
- Pupil questionnaires evaluating mediation processes.

PERCEPTIONS EVALUATION: *How does the school community experience the programme?*

- Explore the views of pupils, teachers and families.
- Identify perceived changes in school climate.

How has this been evaluated?

- Observation questionnaires examining relationships and climate within the school.
- Semi-structured interviews.
- Records of focus-group feedback.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

- A dedicated school-relationships email inbox for requests and suggestions.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME EVALUATION

- Follow up completed mediation processes.
- Monitor pupils who are repeatedly involved in conflict.

How has this been evaluated?

- Disciplinary incident records maintained by the School Relationships Committee.
- Analysis and comparison of recorded conflict types.
- A school-climate assessment rubric.
- Indicators including:
    - Number of reported conflicts.
    - Number of bullying protocols initiated by the school.
    - Participation in collaborative activities, including increased involvement in promoting positive school relationships.

IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

This evaluation will be undertaken by the social and emotional development and mediation team described above.

- Analyse changes in relationship dynamics.
- Explore significant experiences.

How has this been evaluated?

- Case studies.
- Accounts and narratives from teachers and pupils.
- Peer support among teachers and support for pupils.
- Content analysis of minutes and records relating to school relationships and behaviour.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

4. DISCUSSION

It is important to begin by emphasising how valuable it has been to interpret the initial questionnaire findings through a more detailed academic lens. The types of conflict reported responses to them and their effects on pupils' lives reflect some of the defining challenges of our time. As the Yagüe Mayans sisters (2024) argue, the shift from VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), a framework used to characterise our environment since the 1980s, to BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible), popularised in the wake of the disruption caused by COVID-19, captures the changing challenges of working with adolescents. While VUCA emphasised volatility and complexity, BANI foregrounds the fragility and anxiety of contemporary society. Schools must respond to these changes and help young people discover and develop their identities in a world that demands two essential capacities: adaptability and resilience.

In this changing context, teachers must be able to respond effectively to emerging challenges. Drawing on Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky's (2012) work on adaptive leadership, the programme encourages teachers to develop leadership that treats educational problems as challenges to be addressed through learning, innovation, openness and flexibility. Untying Knots therefore approaches the transformation of school relationships and climate as an adaptive challenge, guided by managing uncertainty, empathy, emotional intelligence, openness to diverse perspectives and Heifetz's (2012) notion of "getting on the balcony": stepping back from everyday action to gain a clearer, more objective view of the challenge.

Establishing secure attachment relationships between teachers and pupils is essential to fostering a positive classroom climate. Attachment theory, developed over several decades by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and discussed by Kussin (2024), suggests that teachers who can recognise a pupil's attachment pattern may be better equipped to support emotional regulation in the classroom. Secure teacher–pupil relationships can also improve school climate and academic achievement.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

Damasio (1996) argues that emotions and feelings are necessary for sound decision-making. Developing Teacher Emotional Competence is therefore fundamental to successful mediation. Teachers need emotional self-awareness and self-regulation to provide high-quality education while sustaining their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the institution. Recognising emotions and managing complex emotional states supports teachers' emotional health and allows feeling and learning to become closely connected for pupils: "I feel, therefore I learn." Integrating SEL into school culture and the curriculum is essential if schools are to respond to the adaptive challenge of transforming their relationships and climate through mediation and restorative practices.

5. FINDINGS

The following findings have emerged over the programme's four academic years of implementation.

–The experience has highlighted the need to examine school climate in relation to teachers' levels of Teacher Emotional Competence (TEC). A review of disciplinary incident records suggests that teachers with lower TEC submit more incident reports concerning conflicts with or between pupils. Conversely, classrooms led by teachers who demonstrate stronger TEC appear to have a more positive climate and better academic outcomes.

–Training in TEC, SEL, mediation and restorative practices has been associated with improved conflict management, fewer recorded disciplinary incidents and greater use of mediation by participating teachers. No bullying protocol has had to be activated in compulsory or post-compulsory secondary education during the programme's implementation.

–Coaching and support from the social and emotional development and mediation team for mediation processes initiated by newly trained teachers have helped normalise mediation and establish supported implementation.

–Establishing and training a secondary-level pupil mediation group, together with pupils' proactive participation in school relationships, has improved

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

the school climate and facilitated the early identification of situations involving conflict or risk.

–There has been an increase in structured, individual support sessions in which form tutors help pupils manage their emotions through empathy and acceptance. Supporting pupils' emotional development as they begin to shape their future aspirations can improve both school climate and academic achievement. Feeling accepted, heard and supported changes how pupils relate to others at school.

–Teachers who have completed the programme's training have become more effective at conducting meetings with families about conflict.

–As a result, growing numbers of families approach form tutors or the School Relationships Committee to request mediation for conflicts affecting their children. This represents a shift from the initial survey finding that parents tended to advise their children at home, towards a greater willingness to ask the school to manage such situations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Through Untying Knots, we have observed that school relationships and climate are among the major challenges facing education today, but also one of the areas with the greatest potential to transform school communities.

The programme has sought to improve school relationships by strengthening affective bonds, embedding social and emotional learning, and prioritising mediation and restorative practices in conflict management.

Implementation has taken place in several stages. First, an initial assessment of school relationships and climate was conducted using questionnaires for pupils, families, teachers and administrative and support staff. A team of teachers and pupils then analysed the findings and identified programme priorities. Next, teachers received training in key areas including attachment theory, Teacher Emotional Competence and school mediation. A permanent social and emotional development and mediation team has also been established, alongside a pupil

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

https://doi.org/10.52149/Sp21
ISSN 1886-5895

mediation team. Finally, supported implementation is helping increasing numbers of teachers incorporate emotional regulation and mediation into everyday classroom practice.

Some difficulties have emerged, notably the limited time available within school routines for training and collective reflection, and the need for gradual movement away from traditional sanction-based approaches. Such difficulties are, however, a normal part of institutional change and underscore the importance of continued professional development and support for teaching teams.

Despite these challenges, the experience indicates that interventions of this kind are both feasible and necessary. Questionnaire responses suggest that most school conflicts involve verbal arguments, disrespectful behaviour or difficulties with emotional regulation. Pupils therefore need opportunities to develop the skills required to understand their emotions, engage in dialogue and take responsibility for their actions.

School mediation, SEL and restorative practices support a model of school relationships that moves beyond punishment alone. The aim is to shift from sanction-focused responses towards responsibility, dialogue and repairing harm. This approach not only enables more constructive conflict resolution but also develops personal and social competences essential to life beyond school.

The programme also demonstrates the central role of teachers as mediators and builders of high-quality educational relationships. Teaching should be grounded in a humane approach that places the dignity of every person and care for relationships at its centre.

Ultimately, transforming school relationships and climate is a long-term endeavour requiring time, commitment and institutional consistency. It involves more than introducing new techniques: it requires a change in school culture. Progress towards approaches grounded in mediation, emotional regulation and restorative practices is therefore an important route to more humane, inclusive schools that prepare young people both for life and for living alongside others.

Recepción: 01/08/2026 Aceptación: 12/10/2026

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ISSN 1886-5895

Consolidating this programme can help make school an environment in which pupils learn, live together and grow as individuals.

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ISSN 1886-5895

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