



## IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN GREEK SECONDARY EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE EPIRUS REGION

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores educators' perspectives on implementing restorative justice practices, specifically school mediation, within the High Schools of Epirus, Greece. It aims to enrich the scientific discussion on conflict resolution and school climate enhancement. Focusing on two primary objectives, the study first seeks to capture teachers' views on mediation's effectiveness in managing conflicts and reducing bullying while also fostering a positive, cooperative environment within schools. Secondly, it examines the practical challenges and barriers to the effective application of restorative practices in educational settings. The methodology employed in this study follows a qualitative research design, focusing on analyzing teachers' perspectives on school mediation through thematic content analysis. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and viewpoints of ten (10) principals and teachers in the Epirus Region who perform the role of mediators in High Schools. The sample, selected through convenience sampling, comprises ten educators with direct involvement in mediation processes within their schools. Data were processed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring themes and patterns that reflect the teachers' experiences and perceptions. Findings reveal that while educators acknowledge the benefits of training, they emphasize the crucial role of personal skills, including communication and empathy, in successful mediation. The study also identifies specific barriers, such as parental resistance and entrenched cultural biases, that hinder the mediation process. Notably, mediation is shown to uncover deeper social issues within the school environment, indicating the complex layers that affect student behavior and conflict. This research underlines the significant influence of teacher personality in mediation success

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and highlights the need for ongoing parental involvement to support sustainable improvements in school climate.

**Keywords:** restorative justice, school climate, restorative practices, mediation, school discipline

## 1. Introduction

To understand the potential and challenges of implementing restorative practices in schools, it is essential to first explore the foundational principles and applications of restorative justice. As a broad framework, restorative justice extends beyond specific programs, encompassing diverse practices tailored to different social and cultural contexts. Its emphasis on repairing harm, fostering accountability, and strengthening community bonds aligns closely with the goals of educational settings, particularly in addressing issues such as bullying, conflict resolution, and positive relationships. The following section delves into the theoretical underpinnings, core principles and societal impacts of restorative justice, providing a foundation for its application within school environments.

### 1.1 Restorative Justice and Practices: Principles, Programs, and Community Impact

Restorative justice primarily represents a grid of actions rather than a specific program or field of application (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Zehr, 1995; Wright, 1999). Its applications may vary, but they share core principles: (a) a forward-looking, proactive perspective; (b) a distinction between the offense and the legal behavior defining it; (c) a focus on the individual as a person, rather than as a legal entity (e.g., defendant, accused, or convicted); and (d) an emphasis on the person harmed rather than labeling them solely as a victim (Patrizi, 2019). This approach seeks to humanize both the perpetrator and the victim, framing the actions as harm-producing behaviors rather than legal infractions (Bazemore, 2000). Rather than focusing solely on punishment, restorative justice prioritizes repairing harm, balancing relationships and fostering accountability, all of which involve victims, offenders and the community (EFRJ, 2018; Zehr, 1990). Although different interpretations of restorative justice exist, they all share three essential elements: encounter, reparation and transformation (Zehr, 1995).

Restorative justice programs vary according to the context, the participants and the cultural and social environment in which they operate. These programs may include family group conferences, restorative conferences, peace circles, victim-offender mediation and community-building circles (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). Regardless of the specific program, restorative justice emphasizes the interaction between the victim, offender and community, ensuring that their needs are met and that principles of justice are upheld. Noaks and Noaks (2009) emphasize that restorative justice prioritizes healing relationships among the victim, offender and community, focusing on understanding the harm caused rather than merely imposing punishment. This reparative model includes

actions such as apologies, restitution and reintegration, directly involving the affected parties in resolution efforts instead of relying solely on state-based legal measures. Restorative practices aim to foster relationships, prevent conflict and promote peaceful conflict resolution, ultimately contributing to a just and cohesive society (American Psychological Association, 2008). In this way, restorative justice promotes values such as accountability, solidarity, dignity and truth, encouraging dialogue and mutual understanding (EFRJ, 2018).

Overall, restorative justice views relationships as central to creating social bonds and fostering well-being, presenting a constructive alternative to traditional punitive approaches (Patrizi, 2019). Of particular interest is the implementation of Restorative Practices in the education environment. Here, the core principles of restorative and preventative practices acquire a new role as they are called upon to address challenges such as rising delinquency and bullying, while seeking to strengthen relationships and create a safe and supportive environment for students.

## **1.2 From Punishment to Restoration: Implementing Restorative Justice and Practices at School**

Historically, educational institutions have predominantly utilized prescriptive and punitive frameworks to address student misconduct, often employing zero-tolerance policies that mandate strict, exclusionary measures. Such policies frequently involve student suspensions or expulsions, effectively removing individuals who violate behavioral expectations from both the educational environment and broader social contexts (Welch & Payne, 2012). The American Psychological Association's (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) conducted an extensive review of zero-tolerance strategies, identifying significant adverse effects, including the disproportionate penalization of Black students and those from urban, socioeconomically disadvantaged schools. Additionally, these punitive approaches correlate with increased recidivism of deviant behavior, higher dropout rates and a heightened risk of engagement in future criminal activity (Welch & Payne, 2010; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Noltemeyer *et al.*, 2015). In response to these detrimental outcomes, there is an urgent need for educational systems to consider and implement alternative disciplinary frameworks, particularly restorative justice practices, as a replacement for zero-tolerance policies (McCold, 2005).

Restorative justice practices focus on not only repairing harm after conflicts or harmful behaviors (such as bullying) but also on fostering and cultivating relationships. These practices promote emotional and relational skills like peaceful conflict management, nonviolent communication, security and respect within the school environment (Hopkins, 2002). In this sense, restorative interventions serve a promotional and proactive role by addressing conflicts caused by harmful behaviors while simultaneously working towards the future development of individuals and their relationships. By teaching students to prevent and resolve conflicts peacefully, these programs aim to reduce future incidents of bullying and harmful behavior (UNODC, 2008).

In recent years, educational institutions worldwide have increasingly integrated restorative practices into their cultural and disciplinary frameworks. These initiatives commonly involve training students, educators and staff in essential social and emotional competencies, including empathy, self-worth and nonviolent communication. Additionally, external facilitators are often engaged to address significant issues such as bullying, interpersonal conflicts or aggressive behavior, employing methods such as peer mediation, circle processes, restorative conferencing and family group conferencing (EFRJ, 2018). These restorative strategies not only resolve immediate conflicts but also foster stronger interpersonal connections within the school community, promoting non-judgmental listening and innovative conflict-resolution techniques. The overarching goal of embedding restorative practices throughout the school environment is to cultivate a culture of accountability and relational repair, fostering a more harmonious and cohesive community. This approach is integral to creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual well-being, empowering students and staff to collaboratively resolve conflicts while reducing reliance on punitive measures that may criminalize minor infractions (Welch & Payne, 2012; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013).

Mediation is a key practice within restorative justice frameworks, particularly in school settings, where it serves as an effective tool for addressing conflicts and promoting a positive school climate. As one of the core restorative justice practices, school mediation focuses on repairing relationships and fostering accountability, rather than simply punishing students. It provides a structured environment in which a neutral facilitator helps students engage in constructive dialogue, allowing both the harmed and the responsible parties to express their perspectives and collaboratively find a resolution. By prioritizing communication, empathy and mutual understanding, mediation not only resolves disputes but also reinforces the core values of restorative justice, such as respect, responsibility and reintegration into the school community. As such, mediation plays a crucial role in transforming school conflicts into opportunities for personal growth and the restoration of trust among peers. The connection between the concepts of mediation and restorative justice with school mediation is deeply rooted in the idea that conflicts within educational settings can be addressed in a more constructive and empathetic manner, rather than through punitive measures.

"Peer mediation" or "school-based mediation" refers to a process of conflict resolution between students, where peers take on the role of neutral mediator to help their peers resolve disputes peacefully. This process promotes cooperative dispute resolution through dialogue and peaceful negotiation, helping to improve school climate and foster social and emotional skills (Liebmann, 1996). The concept of peer mediation began to take shape in the 1970s and 1980s, with various academics proposing conflict management programs in schools. David and Roger Johnson were among the first to develop the Circle of Conflict model and proposed the use of peer mediation in the educational setting (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Tania Liebmann (1996) emphasized the importance of peers as mediators, helping to lay the theoretical and practical foundations for the method. Following Liebmann, other researchers such as Bodine and Crawford

(1998) contributed to the improvement of educational conflict resolution programs that incorporated peer mediation. Morrison (2002) approached mediation through social learning, integrating it into a more holistic approach to managing school violence and bullying. Mediation is understood in various ways depending on the theorist's perspective. For instance, Moore (2003) describes mediation as an intervention in a negotiation or conflict by a neutral third party who has little or no authority to make binding decisions, but who helps the involved parties voluntarily reach a mutually acceptable solution to the issues at hand. Goodpaster (1997) views it as a problem-solving negotiation where an impartial, external mediator assists the disputants in finding a satisfactory agreement. In contrast, Bush and Folger (1994) define mediation as a process where a third party helps conflicting parties shift their interaction from negative and harmful to positive and constructive. The concept of mediation and practices of restorative justice reflect approaches to conflict resolution that aim to repair harm and foster dialogue between involved parties. According to Noaks & Noaks (2009), mediation refers to a process where an impartial third party assists disputants in reaching a mutually acceptable solution. It emphasizes communication, negotiation and voluntary agreements, aiming to resolve conflicts without resorting to formal legal systems. For Wall, Stark and Standifer (2001), mediation is seen as a structured and dynamic process where a neutral facilitator encourages dialogue between conflicting parties. This form of alternative dispute resolution prioritizes cooperative problem-solving. Although all these definitions emphasize the role of a mediator, they highlight different functions that a mediator may perform.

Although all these definitions emphasize the role of a mediator, they highlight different functions that a mediator may perform. As a result, mediation is often seen as similar to negotiation. However, despite some overlap, the two processes are not identical. In mediation, parties with seemingly irreconcilable demands hand over only the process of resolving the dispute, not the dispute itself, to the mediator (National Open University of Nigeria, 2006). In contrast, the aim of negotiation is to resolve the dispute directly by reaching common ground or a compromise between the parties. Other conflict resolution methods are often mistakenly equated with mediation, such as arbitration. Mediation differs from arbitration because a mediator does not make decisions about how the conflict should be resolved, whereas an arbitrator does; the mediator's role is to help the parties find a resolution on their own (National Open University of Nigeria, 2006).

In this article, mediation is seen as a process that transforms conflict from a negative, destructive interaction into a positive, constructive one (Bush & Folger, 1994, 2005). From the perspective of education management, this means that the school principal, as an "insider," negotiates with various stakeholders to reconcile differences and ensure that policy changes consider the interests of all parties. Mediation serves two key functions: problem-solving and transformative mediation (Bush & Folger, 1994, 2005). This article focuses on presenting transformative mediation as a leadership strategy for resolving conflicts in schools. Both perspectives underscore mediation and

restorative justice as human-centered approaches, promoting healing, accountability and community engagement over retribution. Both perspectives promote a positive school climate, reduce incidents of bullying or violence and encourage students to develop conflict-resolution skills, which are crucial for their social and emotional development.

## 2. Literature Review

Research confirms that restorative interventions positively impact behavior management and school discipline, with schools reporting declines in student misconduct, injuries, delays in disciplinary actions and school-related offenses. These settings also observe reduced suspension rates and the diminished need for punitive responses (Bonell *et al.*, 2014; 2018; Green *et al.*, 2019; Warren *et al.*, 2019). Whole-school restorative practices support the adoption of alternative, less punitive disciplinary methods, promoting fairness and reducing suspensions and expulsions (Anyon *et al.*, 2016; Gregory *et al.*, 2015; Hashim *et al.*, 2018; Wong *et al.*, 2011).

Restorative justice programs in schools have been shown to significantly reduce incidents of bullying and violence. Studies indicate that schools implementing restorative practices report declines in aggression, violence and bullying compared to those adhering to traditional disciplinary approaches or zero-tolerance policies (Bonell *et al.*, 2014; Green *et al.*, 2019; Gregory *et al.*, 2015; Wong *et al.*, 2011). This reduction in violent behaviors is often accompanied by increased reporting of bullying, underscoring the supportive role of collaboration among principals, teachers, students and families in addressing and managing these issues (Wong *et al.*, 2011). Further research highlights that restorative practices decrease both direct and cyberbullying victimization (Bonell *et al.*, 2014; Green *et al.*, 2019), thereby contributing to safer school environments overall.

The application of restorative practices has also proven effective for a variety of conflicts, including those between students, students and teachers, teachers and parents, students and school staff. These practices promote a holistic approach to conflict resolution, focusing on engagement, proactive problem-solving and nonviolent strategies (Green *et al.*, 2019; Hashim *et al.*, 2018; González *et al.*, 2018; Parker & Bickmore, 2020; Reimer, 2020; Sandwick *et al.*, 2019; Skrzypek *et al.*, 2020). Findings suggest that schools using restorative practices experience improved conflict management, high-resolution success rates and enhanced capacities for peaceful problem-solving. These programs frequently involve both staff and external facilitators who work with students to repair harm, restore norms and support reintegration after suspensions or expulsions. Through these efforts, students learn to independently resolve conflicts, adopt nonviolent solutions and rebuild relationships through actions focused on harm repair.

Research links restorative justice in schools with enhanced student well-being and community cohesion. González *et al.* (2018) and Reimer (2020) found that students who see conflict as a normal relational dynamic use restorative practice to transform conflicts into opportunities for growth. This approach fosters a cohesive school community in which proactive collaboration through dialogue and joint decision-making strengthens

relationships. Other studies underscore the value of teacher-student engagement in conflict resolution, as it cultivates a reflective, dialogue-based culture that reinforces positive relationships and prevents conflicts (Green *et al.*, 2019; Parker & Bickmore, 2020; Reimer, 2020; Sandwick *et al.*, 2019; Skrzypek *et al.*, 2020). Increased use of restorative practices was associated with decreased schoolwide misbehavior, substance abuse, and student mental health challenges, as well as improved school climate and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Further, restorative justice and related practices have shown positive impacts on psychological and mental health. Norris (2014) observed that schools implementing restorative approaches institutionally saw higher student happiness and engagement, while Reimer (2020) highlighted that these practices foster students' sense of meaning and purpose, boosting individual and collective well-being. Warren *et al.* (2019) also documented improvements in students' mental well-being and quality of life, benefiting the overall school environment. Notably, Todic *et al.* (2021) reported fewer health-related absences in schools adopting restorative practices, indicating potential links to improved physical health. Additionally, Kehoe *et al.* (2020) observed reduced anxiety and depression rates, suggesting comprehensive mental health benefits. According to Portia *et al.* (2020), restorative justice practices led to a reduction in student misconduct and an increase in students' psychological capital.

Research also points to restorative practices' role in strengthening interpersonal relationships within the school community. Gregory *et al.* (2016, 2017) emphasized that teachers using restorative approaches cultivated stronger relationships with students, marked by respect and fairness. This practice, particularly impactful in bridging ethnic divides, reduced disciplinary disparities like suspensions and expulsions, thereby promoting a more inclusive and socially just school climate (Ingraham *et al.*, 2019; Sandwick *et al.*, 2019). Ingraham *et al.* (2019) emphasize the critical role of inclusive, collaborative engagement from teachers, parents and students in establishing a collective responsibility that strengthens the entire school community. Similarly, Sandwick *et al.* (2019) highlight how restorative practices increase perceptions of school personnel as supportive, accessible and responsive, which fosters open communication and a nurturing environment conducive to both personal growth and academic success.

The restorative approach is increasingly recognized as an effective framework for creating positive school climates and enhancing school safety. School mediation programs have shown positive effects on school climate and conflict resolution. These programs contribute to improved teamwork, communication, and student engagement while also helping to change attitudes and behaviors (Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018). Studies show substantial improvements in school environments when restorative justice principles are integrated into school policies. Schools adopting these frameworks report that both teachers and students experience a more equitable, secure and inclusive atmosphere. Reimer (2016) notes that restorative justice not only promotes a supportive climate but also builds a deep sense of individual and community belonging. This sense of belonging is achieved through practices that enhance students' connection to their

peers and empower them in decision-making roles, thus promoting active engagement in shaping the school's culture. Although Acosta *et al.* (2019) did not find significant shifts in school climate, they noted that restorative practices strengthened students' attachment to their schools, indicating that restorative methods effectively cultivate student belonging and engagement even without immediate environmental changes. González *et al.* (2019) found that implementing restorative practices school-wide fosters shared leadership and collaborative decision-making, reinforcing inclusivity and collective identity within the school. Ingraham *et al.* (2019) stress the significance of integrating multicultural perspectives into restorative practices, extending benefits beyond the school to students' families, fostering a broader "culture of care" that connects home and school. Farr *et al.* (2019) identify core elements essential for a secure, positive school environment, including a school-wide openness to change, strong collegial support, shared leadership and active family engagement to build stronger ties among schools, families and communities. 71% of schools perceived the mediation program as a positive tool to improve school climate and conflict resolution (Carlos *et al.*, 2008). Peer mediation is an effective way to deal with conflicts, especially among children in school settings (Rotărescu, 2021). Overall, the restorative approach fosters an inclusive, community-focused environment where students feel connected and valued, contributing to the development of a safer and more supportive school climate.

Research indicates that restorative practices effectively cultivate essential social, interpersonal and emotional skills in students, including assertiveness, problem-solving, emotional awareness and prosocial behaviors. School mediation programs have been shown to be effective tools for promoting social and emotional skills, conflict resolution, and a positive school climate. These programs help students develop prosocial behaviors, improve interpersonal relationships, and contribute to a culture of peace in educational settings (Costa *et al.*, 2018). Implementing these practices in schools encourages empathy through emotional expression, active listening and self-reflection, fostering accountability, critical thinking and social-emotional development in areas such as self-efficacy, empathy, self-awareness and communication (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016; Bonell *et al.*, 2014; González *et al.*, 2016; Ingraham *et al.*, 2016; Wong *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, Ahmed *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that restorative methods applied to bullying help develop shame management skills. Bonell *et al.* (2014) found that teacher training in restorative and social-emotional competencies improved these skills, justifying curricular integration. González *et al.* (2016) showed that whole-school restorative practices enhance communication, resilience and leadership. Ingraham *et al.* (2016) reported that restorative discipline promotes empathy and effective communication, strengthening relationships beyond school. Likewise, Wong *et al.* (2016) and Kehoe *et al.* (2016) highlighted growth in empathy, self-awareness and responsibility, while Parker *et al.* (2020) confirmed that restorative dialogue nurtures active listening and emotional intelligence in students. According to Singla, Shinde, Patton, and Patel (2020), mediation improves school climate, particularly relationships at school, and can mediate positive effects on adolescent mental health outcomes.



### 3. Material and Methods

The purpose of this research is to explore teachers' views on the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools and, in particular, the implementation of school mediation. The research effort examines the views of principals and teachers who bear the role of mediator in the General High Schools of the Epirus region, contributing productively to the scientific dialogue on conflict management, peaceful conflict resolution and the formation of a positive climate in the school.

The main objectives of the present research are:

- a) to outline the views of teachers working in General High Schools of the Epirus Region on the process of mediation, on the one hand in terms of conflict management and the reduction of bullying and on the other hand in the creation of a positive and cooperative climate within the school.
- b) to explore both the challenges and the factors that constitute a barrier to the implementation and effectiveness of restorative justice and school mediation practices.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What role does the teacher play in mediating conflicts in general high schools?
- 2) What challenges and obstacles are encountered in implementing the school mediation process in practice?
- 3) Does school mediation succeed in improving school climate and school community?

The research methodology includes a combined approach of literature review and field research through qualitative data collection methods, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' and principals' perceptions of school mediation. Initially, a literature review was conducted at the international and national levels to clarify the concepts of restorative justice and school mediation. This review helped to construct a theoretical framework and identify key challenges and success factors documented in the literature regarding the implementation of restorative practices in schools. A grid of questions was then designed based on the previous documentation to meet the aims of this research. A qualitative approach was chosen for data collection, in particular, the use of semi-structured interviews. In this research, the choice of the qualitative method is considered appropriate as it allows the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the teachers' personal experiences, perceptions and opinions, emphasizing the particularities and emotional nuances of their responses (Bryman, 2015).

The sampling was based on "convenience sampling", by selecting ten (10) teachers and principals from General and Vocational High Schools in the Region of Epirus in Greece, who have experience in the role of mediator. Convenient sampling was considered appropriate to ensure access to individuals with relevant experience while allowing for the collection of data reflecting different perspectives and experiences of teachers in the field of school mediation. The semi-structured interviews were designed to give participants the opportunity to express themselves freely while providing a

structured framework to guide discussion around specific themes such as their role in conflict mediation, the challenges they face and the impact of mediation on school climate. During the interviews, emphasis was placed on active listening and avoiding leading questions to ensure the authenticity of responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, following the methodology of Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed the data to be grouped into themes, focusing on the recurring ideas and patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. Thematic analysis was particularly effective in highlighting differences and shared perceptions between participants, providing a coherent framework for understanding their views on school mediation and restorative justice practices. To structure the analysis, an open coding approach was adopted, in which the data were separated into key conceptual sections and then organized into main categories representing the research themes. Through the coding and thematic analysis, it was possible to identify both the barriers and opportunities that teachers and principals identify in the field of school mediation. The combined approach of literature review and analysis of data from semi-structured interviews through thematic analysis enhances the credibility of the research and contributes significantly to understanding the factors that influence the effective implementation of restorative justice practices in schools.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Role of the Teacher as a Mediator

Initially, it sought to map the role of the teacher in restorative justice practices and mediation. Initially, teachers were asked about the person who takes on the role of mediator in their own schools. Without exception, all of them stated that both they and the students are trained to take on the role of mediator. However, the practice differs as the role of the mediator is almost exclusively taken on by either the headmaster or a teacher in the school, in many cases with the agreement of the parents' and teachers' association. All the teachers interviewed state that the presence of the teacher as an ombudsman is a strong requirement of both the pupils and the PTA. The following statement is indicative: "*students want, insistently ask in most cases, seek to discuss their problems in the presence of a teacher. They do not show the willingness to be only among peers*" (Subject 2) but also the view that "*students suggest specific teachers as mediators*" (Subject 5).

Then, the next question concerned the role of the teacher's presence in terms of mediation. The responses focused on the fact that his/her presence as a mediator helps to create and maintain a safe and encouraging environment for students to be motivated and speak openly. In other words, the teacher's presence as a mediator creates a sense of safety and a climate of respect and cooperation among students. The presence of the teacher seemed to create a positive and respectful school climate, where relationships are fostered, and trust is built, thus improving students' experiences. Furthermore, teachers state that the mediator's ability to recognize the types of conflicts and his/her timely reaction are elements sought by students. It is typical of the statements that "*...as long as*

*the teacher is close to them and the children themselves feel confident to express what they think and what they have happened. His presence reduces fear..." (Subject 3) "... the teacher knows and understands what a conflict is about and why it is happening. He knows respectively how to prevent it..." (Subject 7)*

Regarding the question about the ways in which teachers should prepare themselves for the role of mediator, most respondents answered that continuous training, ongoing support and professional development of each teacher are necessary conditions for each teacher to acquire the knowledge and appropriate skills to meet the requirements of this role. They even stated that this is best achieved by attending seminars, experiential workshops and training programmes. For example, they claim that *"participation in practical activities, activities to represent mediation cases, will provide the teacher with appropriate guidance"*. (Subject 8)

The following observation is remarkable: 7 out of 10 teachers with a mediator role expressed the opinion that training is necessary, but it is supportive of the mediator's work without evaluating it as a priority. On the contrary, they consider that the personality, character traits, communication and psycho-emotional skills of the teacher contribute more effectively to the work of the mediator. More specifically, teachers consider mediation to be a person-centred process that depends both on the character and attitude of the teacher and the overall personality of the mediator in question. Respondents consider that empathy, self-awareness, responsibility, impartiality, lack of stereotypes and objectivity are elements that are more interwoven in the teacher's personality and help in the role of mediator. A requirement, as mentioned by the teachers in the sample, is that the educational mediator must be respected, valued and trusted by the pupils in order to be successful in his/her role. In short, they believe that the effectiveness of mediation is a product of the interpersonal skills of the teacher. In particular, it was said that *"... is a result of the overall culture and attitude towards life, it is found in his communication skills. It is in the whole the power of bridging contrasts"* (Subject 7) but also *"The mediator must enjoy the confidentiality, esteem and respect of the students. Otherwise, he cannot succeed in his role"*. (Subject 10)

Respondents consider that specific skills are needed for mediation to be effective. Communication and interpersonal skills to their responses. In particular, they indicated that honesty and transparency of their role are important characteristics to achieve effective communication with all students. They consider that teachers should understand the needs of students, deal with their emotional reactions in a rational way and be characterized by empathy. They even express that these characteristics should be passed on to students. In addition, they express the view that he or she should be prepared to detect the needs of students and manage conflicts in a peaceful manner. They consider that the mediator's essential characteristics are his/her cooperativeness with third parties to solve problems and creativity to develop innovative solutions. They also stress that he or she should behave with sensitivity and respect for diversity and multiculturalism, trusting his or her negotiating skills.

The conflicts that teachers as mediators are called upon to manage are mainly conflicts between classmates. These are personal disagreements between pupils, fights resulting from the spreading of a rumour and incidents of mild physical violence. Conflicts within groups or communities of pupils are also mentioned, such as *“these are disputes between different groups of pupils who claim to have opposing interests or belong to rival sports teams and clubs”* (Subject 1). To a lesser extent, teachers state that conflicts can be between students and teachers, especially when related to teacher decisions in relation to assessment and/or student behaviour. To a significantly lesser extent, incidents of mediation between students and their parents are also reported, however, related to issues such as choice of course of study, the student's behaviour in the school environment or expectations of the school.

#### **4.2 Mediation as a Factor of School Climate**

The central question of this research was whether school mediation succeeds in improving school climate. Teachers answered that, in any case, it helps to resolve conflicts and disputes in a peaceful way. Restorative justice practices enhance the sense of well-being and safety in the school environment and the social cooperation skills of students with each other and students with teachers. Teachers believe that mediation teaches students open communication and respect for differing viewpoints. Finally, they consider that it helps to prevent bullying incidents. A typical view is that *“...mediation promotes a sense of solidarity, teaches children to listen and be heard and to respect their interlocutor...”* (Subject 9).

They report that the result of the process is a more cohesive school community, where students and staff proactively work together to address conflicts and find solutions through dialogue and co-creative decision-making, promoting a culture of dialogue and reflection for peaceful conflict resolution. It also contributes to conflict prevention, fosters positive relationships within the school, and builds strong, positive and lasting relationships. Regarding the school's relationship with parents and the wider community, teachers express the view that this cooperation is a necessity. It is appreciated that parents are important partners in dealing with problems, thus addressing together any conflicts and tensions that may arise in the school environment. Subject 4's view that *“parental support and involvement can enhance students' emotional well-being by promoting a sense of security”* (Subject 4) meets this requirement. Furthermore, they state that the participation of parents in the dialogue offers additional perspectives and ideas for peaceful conflict resolution, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the process.

#### **4.3 Challenges and Difficulties in Implementing Mediation**

The discussion then moved on to the possible challenges and difficulties that the mediation process brings in its implementation. The teachers' first reaction was related to the family environment, especially the involvement of parents. In particular, they reported that parents, in many cases, expressed resistance, which they attributed to lack of experience, prejudice and fear. It seems that the cultural and value background of the

family impinges on the attempt to resolve conflicts. A remarkable fact is the mention of a common example. Although the exact words of only one teacher are quoted, all of the survey respondents referred to the same example: *"...children who bully students of homosexual sexual orientation usually express the violence of the rhetoric the family believes. In these cases, this behavior is accepted or even rewarded by some parents. Any attempt at mediation or dialogue on the part of the school not only comes to nothing but causes greater tension..."* (Subject 2).

Teachers explain that when the basis of the students' misbehaviour is an extension of family problems, lack of interest on the part of the family and the problems that may exist within the family (conflictual divorces, alcoholism, drugs), the treatment in these cases is much more difficult and is resisted both in the social and family environment of the student and in the child himself, who becomes the agent of reaction. It is even reported that in more difficult cases, young pupils who carry within them an authoritarian value system and reproduce family beliefs in the school environment benefit from mediation after persistent effort. On the contrary, the participants state that in cases where the source of the problem is individual/internal (a child with poor socialization characteristics, small fights based on opposing views or positions on everyday things, spreading rumours or theft) they are resolved much more easily and radically.

At this point, special mention should be made of parental involvement. Teachers stated that the absolute majority of parents who contact the school seeking help are concerned about students who have been victims. No parent asked for help and support from the school to curb their child's authoritarian and violent behaviour. A particular finding of this research is that mediation contributes to the universal disclosure of the problem. This means that the initial event that led students to seek support and guidance is only part of the problem. Through the processes of mediation, very different elements come to light, compared to those initially stated. In short, their initial statement represents the tip of an iceberg of problems that are not immediately visible but need to be resolved. Through discussion and dialogue, different dimensions and implications of the issue emerge. The statement that *"...when students turn to the teacher for mediation, they reveal only part of their initial problems. It is a challenge for the teacher to discover the whole truth..."* (Subject 5) shows the importance of the process. Furthermore, the views that *"...the school must give priority to managing those students who have a leading and leading role in shaping factors that lead to conflict..."* (Subject 6). However, there is also the view that *"....dealing with the most hard-core situations is a solution for milder ones..."* (Subject 3) highlights yet another challenge that the school as a whole has to manage in selecting critical incidents to be taken directly to mediation.

Finally, of special interest is the view expressed by several respondents that the school should prioritise those students who have a leadership role in shaping factors that lead to conflict, and elements of delinquency and push other students to imitate their negative behaviour. Dealing with the harder situations is a solution for the milder ones, according to them. Through the process of mediation, students as a whole see difficult

situations lead to conflict resolution and follow the corresponding example. As one of the school principals explains, *"when there is a large-scale incident that bullies other students, everyone moves into this sphere. Conversely, when the strong risk is reduced, the milder form of violent incidents is automatically reduced."* The prevalence of dialogue and the search for balance help to defuse tensions and encourage other students to follow the process. Furthermore, the positive outcome of some incidents leads other students to seek harmonious resolution of disputes through mediation. All participants consider that mediation contributes positively to preventing incidents of bullying and dealing with them in a better way.

## 5. Discussion

The comparison between our research findings and existing literature reveals both overlaps and unique insights that enrich the understanding of restorative justice and mediation in educational settings.

Firstly, regarding the teacher's role as mediator, a significant commonality, as established in the literature, is the expectation that teachers facilitate and mediate conflicts between students, thus fostering a secure and supportive space for open communication (Reimer, 2020; Moore, 2003; Goodpaster, 1997; Bush & Folger, 1994). Our findings corroborate this, showing that teachers frequently act as mediators, a role reinforced by the expectations of students and parents for teacher-led guidance in conflict situations. Notably, in the General and Vocational High Schools of Epirus, teachers exclusively fulfill the role of mediator, with no reports of students assuming mediation responsibilities. This reliance on teacher mediation highlights a cultural expectation within Greek schools for teacher intervention as an essential element of the school's social framework.

A notable difference, however, arises in the emphasis on the teacher's personality as a core factor in mediation success. While the literature often underscores the importance of training in equipping teachers for this role (Bonell *et al.*, 2014), teachers in our study emphasized the critical role of personal qualities—such as empathy, communication, and an intuitive understanding of student needs—as primary factors over formal training. Teachers consider training beneficial but view it as supportive rather than foundational to successful mediation. This perspective emphasizes mediation as a person-centered process, where the teacher's personality and interpersonal skills are pivotal, underscoring the importance of attributes that are not easily conveyed through standard training programs. This raises essential considerations about the nature and sufficiency of current training methods, suggesting that program designs should integrate opportunities for developing personal and interpersonal skills beyond technical instruction.

Furthermore, our findings align with the literature that associates mediation with improvements in school climate, as both confirm that restorative justice practices foster safety, respect and collaboration among students and staff (Reimer, 2020). Teachers in

our research reported that mediation not only addresses immediate conflicts but also functions as a preventive measure against bullying, fostering a culture of openness and mutual respect, thereby resonating with established findings on restorative justice's positive impact (González *et al.*, 2019). However, our research adds a new layer by emphasizing that mediation in Greece, in the region of Epirus, schools not only de-escalate conflicts but also offer a psychological outlet for students, which contributes significantly to emotional release and tension management, further strengthening interpersonal bonds.

Another differentiating aspect observed in this study is the role of parental involvement. While international studies acknowledge family collaboration in school-based mediation (González *et al.*, 2019), our findings indicate that teachers in Greek schools place even greater emphasis on active parental participation as critical to successful conflict resolution and emotional well-being. Teachers indicated that involving parents not only aids in addressing conflict more comprehensively but also plays a role in reinforcing restorative values outside the school, a perspective not extensively emphasized in the broader literature. This insight suggests that in contexts like Epirus, where family ties are strong, a holistic approach involving family cooperation could be integral to restorative practices.

Challenges associated with implementing restorative justice were also frequently reported in both the literature and our findings, particularly in cases where a small group of parents or some family members may resist mediation because of cultural values that conflict with school goals. Specifically, teachers noted that parental resistance is pronounced in cases of bullying related to sexual orientation, where certain parents may condone or even endorse aggressive responses based on cultural beliefs. This cultural barrier, particularly evident in cases of identity-based bullying, represents an additional complexity that is not widely discussed in current research (González *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, our findings reveal that the mediation process often uncovers deeper, underlying issues contributing to student misconduct, such as socioeconomic pressures or familial problems, which are not immediately visible. This aligns with the literature's view of mediation as a conflict resolution tool but expands upon it by highlighting its diagnostic role in exposing underlying behavioral influences. Teachers observed that mediation often reveals hidden layers of violence or conflict that were not initially apparent, demonstrating that restorative practices can serve as a lens for addressing broader systemic issues affecting students, thus presenting a more intricate challenge than previously suggested (Bonell *et al.*, 2014; Sandwick *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, regarding necessary skills, while the literature strongly emphasizes formal training and specific competencies as essential for mediation (Bonell *et al.*, 2018), teachers in our study place greater emphasis on personal qualities—such as communication skills and the ability to manage emotions—as key factors influencing their effectiveness as mediators. Although training remains acknowledged as important, the teachers we interviewed suggested that their own interpersonal strengths often take precedence in real-world applications of mediation, particularly in managing the emotional

complexities that arise. This insight points to the potential value of reevaluating training programs to more explicitly foster these personal skills alongside technical training.

In summary, our findings align with existing literature on the overall benefits of restorative practices in enhancing school climate and supporting student well-being but add depth by underscoring the importance of the mediator's personality, the specific cultural challenges faced, and the role of parental cooperation in fostering a sustainable, restorative environment. The Greek school context, as represented by our sample, suggests a nuanced approach to restorative justice, one that appreciates not only the procedural but also the personal and social factors that contribute to successful mediation.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study led to important findings that highlight the status and specificities of mediation in the school environment of high schools in the region of Epirus.

Teachers exclusively assume the role of mediator, as no cases of students assuming the same role are reported. This reflects a cultural expectation within Greek schools, where teacher intervention is considered an essential element of the social structure of the school. The success of mediation is mainly attributed to the teacher's personal skills, such as empathy, communication skills and understanding of students' needs. Teachers find formal education useful, but not decisive, highlighting the need to develop personal skills through training programmes. This highlights that mediation is primarily a person-centred process where the personality of the mediator plays a critical role, and they prioritise their personal skills, which are seen as critical to effectively managing the emotional challenges that arise. Mediation has proven to be effective both in conflict management and in preventing problems such as bullying, enhancing the school climate with respect and open communication. In Epirus, in particular, it also acts as an outlet for emotional relief for students, strengthening interpersonal relationships and helping to manage conflict.

Parental involvement is considered crucial for the success of mediation, as it facilitates a holistic approach to conflict and reinforces the values of restorative justice inside and outside the school. However, cultural barriers, such as resistance from some parents-particularly in cases of bullying related to sexual orientation-illustrate the complexity of mediation in societies with strong cultural traditions. In addition, the mediation process often reveals deeper causes of conflict, such as socio-economic pressures or family problems, which are not immediately visible. This confirms the diagnostic role of mediation, which offers a broader understanding of the systemic issues that affect students' behaviour.

Overall, our research highlights the need for a more person-centred and culturally sensitive approach to mediation, integrating social and personal parameters in the context of restorative justice in schools in Greece.



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