
Students Doing Conflict Resolution? A Case Study in a Free School

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ABSTRACT While the challenges of improving young people's citizenship skills seem to lie in the hands of schools, studying alternative ways of teaching conflict resolution could benefit current educational systems. Judicial committees – a democratic approach to conflict resolution – like those practiced in free schools – schools where students and teachers are largely entitled to similar rights and obligations – represent such an alternative. The present inquiry is an ethnographic case study that draws upon complexity thinking. It aims at understanding students' experiences during free school judicial committees. It argues that, in a school where students enjoy a significant amount of freedom, students interacted in many ways. This gave rise to some conflicts. To tackle them, students followed various procedures inherent to judicial committees. During these activities, students mostly experienced a combination of feelings while engaging in conflict resolution processes and modifying their conflict resolution skills. The study ends by arguing that conventional schools can draw upon the principles associated to judicial committees to further how they teach conflict resolution.

When Marshall Rosenberg went to a Swedish prison to teach nonviolent communication, he met with John, someone incarcerated for murder, who asked him for help to attend a training course in order to get a job once released from jail (Rosenberg, 2003). According to John, if he did not get this training course, he was going to be sent back soon after his release. He told Rosenberg, 'they still haven't responded to my request ... they are a bunch of cold, faceless bureaucrats who don't give a damn about anybody but themselves'. During the conversation, Rosenberg tried to teach John to focus his attention on his needs. At one point, Rosenberg told him:

Put yourself in the shoes of the prison official. If I am an inmate, am I more likely to get my needs met if I come to you saying, 'Hey, I really need that training and I am scared of what's going to happen if I don't get it,' or if I approach while seeing you as a faceless bureaucrat. (Rosenberg, 2003, p.128)

After hearing those words, John stared at the floor. He did not want to talk anymore. Three hours later, he told Rosenberg: 'I wish you had taught me two years ago what you taught me this morning. I wouldn't have had to kill my best friend' (Rosenberg, 2003, p.128). Obviously, not all training on conflict resolution will give rise to an extreme situation like this. However, developing this citizenship skill could help many in dealing with everyday social interactions, whether they involve conflicts or not. Conflict resolution skills could help two co-workers solve a dispute or could further two siblings' relationship. Standing from the educational viewpoint, I asked myself how we could teach conflict resolution. In my reflection, I learned about free schools – schools largely run democratically by students and teachers together –and the judicial committees that many of these schools support. These judicial committees correspond to democratic activities that aim at enabling students to solve their interpersonal conflicts. I conducted a study about what students' experiences were during these judicial committees in relation to citizenship education. In this article, I will present my results and argue that conventional schools could benefit from

developing hands-on approaches, such as the judicial committees, when tackling conflict resolution. Beforehand, I will address what research has said about conflict resolution in order to justify my undertaking of the study, and will briefly introduce the complexivist principles that I used to guide my study and my research design.

What Research Says about Conflict Resolution and Free School

During my inquiry, I reviewed selected studies on conflict resolution and this led me to identify free school judicial committees as a concept to explore, with respect to conflict resolution. While Danesh (2008) defined conflict as the absence of unity, and conflict resolution as the process to reach this unity, conflict resolution remains a complex process to define and there is no agreement on what conflict resolution is. In this article, I will use a definition of conflict resolution that I co-constructed using a theme that was recurrent in the data that I collected, as well as principles of non-violent communication, to guide my argument. I will refer to conflict resolution as an active process that involves at least two individuals or groups of people in finding a way to have their needs met within their relationship.

I selected 16 studies that focused on conflict resolution after entering this concept as a keyword whilst searching in multiple educational databases for peer-reviewed articles, published since 2005. Given that conflict resolution is one of the five axes of peace education, most articles related to this field of education. The first group of these studies looked into conflict resolution at a social level, e.g. conflicts such as those between nations or between ethnic groups. For instance, Danesh (2008) described a nine-volume curriculum, mostly used in 112 primary and secondary schools in the context of former Yugoslavia. Even though the focus of this curriculum is peace education, conflict resolution represented a key element of this initiative. As another example, Harris and Lewer (2008) reported on the first implementation of a course on conflict resolution in a post-secondary institution in a conflict zone of Sri Lanka to argue that, in conflict and post-conflict situations, tertiary level education programs provide a safe environment for local stakeholders to experiment with the discourse of peace (p. 127).

A second, but smaller group of studies analysed specific programs that aimed at teaching conflict resolution. One of these studies contended that conflict resolution programs can give rise to an improved school climate and strengthened relationships between students (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007). Another study revealed that school leaders face conflicts routinely, involving students, teachers, and parents, and that school leaders are worried that their training with respect to conflict management is limited (Anderson, 2007). Lastly, Hettler and Johnston (2009) reviewed American peace education programs, congruent with experiential education, that granted a great deal of space to conflict resolution. Despite the efficiency of these initiatives, they remained out-of-school programs, such as summer training programs.

The final group of articles formulated various suggestions as to how to teach conflict resolution. Brewer and Harlin (2008) wrote an argumentative piece with the aim of assisting teachers in identifying characteristics associated to bullying in its many forms, to advocate for the use of social studies to develop students' understanding of bullying and of conflict resolution. In another research article, Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri (2005) argued that schools need to resolve conflicts peacefully, and that this requires caring environments, students' involvement in the decision-making, as well as teachers modelling of pro-social behaviours.

These three groups of studies pointed out that conflict happens in schools (e.g. Anderson, 2007). Many of their suggestions assigned the role of the resolution of conflicts to schools, school leaders, or teachers. They also indicated that some programs dedicated to conflict resolution can be efficient. Should teaching conflict resolution skills matter? For Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri (2005), the first step towards global cooperation and peace is the resolution of conflicts here at home. In this context, what is the place granted to conflict resolution teaching in schools? In the Ontario curriculum, the Canadian province where I currently live, the notion of conflict resolution appears multiple times (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999) suggesting that policy-makers are concerned with this issue. As another example, Wheeler and Stomfay-Stitz (2006) revealed from focus groups with several teachers that most of these educators tried nurturing conflict resolution skills by setting up peace tables or peace patrols as weekly jobs. However, according to Edwards (2010), in

the context of neoconservative policies, that put emphasis on the 'basics', such as 'No Child Left Behind', little room is reserved for citizenship education and components of this field, such as conflict resolution.

Consequently, I decided to examine alternative ways of developing conflict resolution skills. Given that Hettler and Johnston (2009) praised the efficiency of experiential education programs with regard to this matter, I looked for hands-on approaches. In addition, keeping in mind Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri's (2005) call for students' engagement in the decision-making process, I decided to look at students' engagement in judicial committees in free schools.

For Greenberg (1995) and Neill (1992), two free school founders, free schools form a counter movement to compulsory education within compulsory education. For Neill (1992), the purpose of his institution, Summerhill School, was to lay the foundation for a happy and responsible life for his students. To achieve these goals, the staff of the free school largely possess the same rights and obligations as students. Fostering responsible individuals presupposes that the responsibility for each person's activities lies with that person, not with someone else in a position of authority (Greenberg, 1995). Thus, students are responsible for their education, and their freedom stops where that of others begins (Neill, 1992). In these conditions, attending class is optional, though students must remain on school grounds and follow the law, as well as fire and security regulations. In this setting, democratic activities regulate school life (Greenberg, 1995). They include school meetings and, in some cases, judicial committees. School members who believe that someone violated their rights can bring this person to a judicial committee. Describing the operations of judicial committees happening in his school, Greenberg (1995) reported that the attendees to these committees rule on guilt and innocence, and issue sentences through equal votes. As an example, Neill (1992) wrote that a student could lose a privilege at the cafeteria after having borrowed a bicycle without asking.

What does research say about free school judicial committees? Darling (1992) mentioned that democratic principles were central to the regulation of the social life at Summerhill School, and that Neill considered that students' intrinsic motivation should initiate every learning activity (Darling, 1984). Croft and Falusi (1969), investigating a Canadian free school, concluded that free schools positively affect students' mental health due to the absence of coercion in these schools, and illustrated the efficiency of self-studies. Eriksen and Fiske (1973) identified collaboration and openness as factors favouring teachers' adaptability to working in a newly founded free school. Swidler (1976) contended that free schools teach group skills, as well as nurture self-directedness and a positive perception of school and of learning, while fostering few academic skills. Novak (1974) characterized as anomic the organization of a particular free school, while concluding that each free school represents a continuous construction on a daily basis. Betts (1975) concluded that free schools contribute to the development of students' positive perception of themselves, and that free school students have more vocational intentions and are more inclined to pursue post-secondary studies. Concurring with Bernstein (1968), Gray and Chanoff (1986) claimed that the graduates of a free school had experienced no difficulty in adapting to the demands of traditional higher education and that they were successful in a variety of careers.

Historically, few authors within the free school movement have made allusions to such schools in Canada. Miller (2002), for instance, indicates that, while the free school movement was expanding in the United States of America after the publication of *Summerhill School* (Neill, 1961), and during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, various groups of individuals started setting up free schools in Toronto. However, I have only found one study about a free school in Canada (Croft & Falusi, 1969).

Croft and Falusi (1969) made references to these schools to situate their inquiry. They described these schools as small in size, seldom attended by more than 30 students. According to Miller (2002), the periods of existence of these schools were relatively small. Today, free schools represent a small portion of schools across Canada. Their number is fluctuating from year to year. Only three of these schools are currently listed on the website of the International Democratic Education Network (IDEN, 2012). Two of those are within the public system of education. A free school operating as a pilot-project lasted one year in 2008 in Montreal, while a group of lobbyists are fighting for more freedom in education in the province of Quebec so that free schools can become legal (L'École Libre Radicale de Mtl Rad School, 2012).

Therefore, while no study has focused on the potential of judicial committees in relation to conflict resolution, and while no inquiry was recently carried out about free schools, notably in Canada, I tried to understand students' experiences during judicial committees. While most studies on free schools relied on extended periods of on-site observation, and on interviews to generate rich descriptions of various operations of free schools, I chose to conduct an ethnographic case study.

Theoretical Framework

I used three main principles from complexity thinking – the study of complex phenomenon – to frame my inquiry. The notion of 'emergence' is the first principle. It differs from the idea of causality, as the concept of emergence assumes that homogenous individuals (such as students from similar backgrounds) can react differently to similar conditions, and can learn new responses to those conditions (Davis, 2004). As such, these responses are adaptive as they can change. As an example to illustrate the differences between causality and emergence, one can kick a rock and, after some repetitions, predict the trajectory of the rock. On the other hand, one can kick a dog (as horrible as this might sound) and still would not be able to predict any dog's reaction after many repetitions. The actions of students follow similar patterns. While a group of students might respond in one way when interacting with or in judicial committees, this does not mean that a similar group of students will have the same reaction during judicial committees. Despite this, the reactions of both groups of students remain parts of a repertoire of possibilities that can emerge during judicial committees. Hence, I described the experiences of students that I investigated as possibilities that are part of this repertoire.

The second principle that guided my study is that of 'nestedness'. This notion implies that students' experiences do not happen in isolation (Davis, 2004). They are nested within larger phenomena, such as the evolution of a society, and can nest smaller phenomena (e.g. biological ones). Thus, for the purpose of my argument, I collected data about both the judicial committees in which students' experiences occurred, and about the activities of the school in which these committees took place. Lastly, I assumed that experiences combined feelings, actions, and, potentially, learning. I considered learning as the adaptation of a learner's current repertoire of possible actions (Davis, 2004).

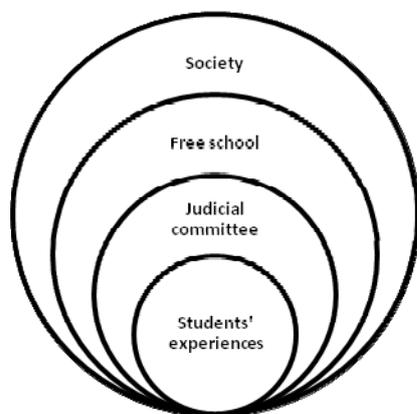


Figure 1. Nestedness.

Methodology

Based on these principles, I carried out an ethnographic case study. My research design comprised an ethnographic component because free schools represent a unique school culture. For my data collection, this implied proceeding *in situ* (Walford, 2008), that is an involvement in the practices of the participants at the school, notably through participant observations and by spending prolonged periods of time in the field. My ethnographic inquiry remained a case study as I focused on one school in order to generate an in-depth description of the experiences (Creswell, 2007).

I conducted my research project at Canadian Free School (a pseudonym), an urban Canadian free school, attended by 36 students aged between 12 and 15 years old. My data collection took place in 2009 and lasted five intensive weeks. In total, four educators and eighteen students participated in my study. To collect data, I spent prolonged periods of time observing both the general activities of the school (classes, informal activities, democratic meetings) and the judicial committees (three sessions in total). In addition, I completed 17 interviews with both educators and students. I questioned them about observed and previous judicial committees. My questions were mostly open-ended and bore on how participants felt, what they did, and what they changed during the judicial committees. I also collected artefacts that related to the activities of the school and to the judicial committees, such as records produced by students during judicial committees. To analyse my data, I mostly used participants' words and notions that emerged in the literature review to categorise various recurring themes and subthemes relevant to the experiences of students. For instance, when a student said 'I do much appreciate them' in relation to the judicial committees, I categorised the statement as 'feeling of appreciation'. Lastly, I divided my themes and subthemes in function of the level of nestedness to which they related (the activities of the school, the judicial committees, or students' experiences).

Results: students' experiences during judicial committees

In this section, I depict the operations of the free school to contextualise the judicial committees. Then, I portray the processes inherent to judicial committees and what students experienced when taking part in these committees.

The Operations of Canadian Free School

The operations of Canadian Free School were guided by certain principles. According to Educator 3 [1], self-directed learning was one of them:

The assumption on which [the school] is built is that people actually do want to succeed in life. They don't want to do nothing. They want to be able to help themselves so, if you give them the opportunity to do so, they will move naturally in that direction ... this is one of the reasons why we are pursuing this way.

In the school, this principle meant considering that students would be able to take the necessary steps to reach their goals if left with the responsibility of choosing when, what, and how to learn. As an implication for self-directed learning, Educator 3 added:

The teachers will offer the regular curriculum to the students, but only as an offer, not as something that [students] are forced to do, but [students] will have the opportunity to see what other people of their age would normally see in society so they can decide for themselves if they want to go in that route.

Observations of the school indicated that educators presented optional courses to students derived from the ministerial curriculum, as teachers largely allowed students the freedom to do what they wanted with themselves. The classes varied from below to above grade level. In this context, when an educator invited students to take part in a mathematics class, students who elected to participate in other activities did. On one occasion, students including Tom, Dan, and Joe played games like chess or cards, while a group of students attended the class. Most classes gathered five to ten students. In this context, students had plenty of opportunities for interactions between themselves and with teachers. Of course, these opportunities gave rise to some conflicts on some occasions.

Educator 3 spoke about the notion of community as a second element that structured the operations of the school:

Everybody's voice is important to develop a community. Everybody has to put in what they believe to be the right way to do things ... what is to be considered to be the truth for the school has to be built out of all the perspectives that people have.

Here, the community included educators, parents, and students. Educator 3 explained that weekly class meetings and monthly community meetings represented two types of consensus-based

democratic activities for students, teachers, and parents to develop the community, by deciding on the activities of the school, and on rules to implement. In those activities, participants elected a chair and voted to take decisions. Everyone had the rights to add any topic to the agenda and to share their opinion. In the consensus model of the school, if someone had a major objection with the decision taken at the end of a vote, the community had to find a way to satisfy the needs of that person.

The Judicial Committees

Another principle of the school was that interpersonal conflicts would be solved democratically. On this topic, Educator 2 mentioned, 'Conflict resolution is not something that is going to come down from me. It is something that [students] have to learn to figure out'. The goal of judicial committees was to enable students to solve and to learn to solve conflicts. Prior to calling a judicial committee, a person involved in a dispute had to go through a certain number of steps. A document that was written by one of the teachers in the school, and sent to everyone involved, listed these steps:

- (1) Students are encouraged to solve their own conflicts when they arise.
- (2) If the conflict cannot be solved at the time, any person involved in the conflict tells the others involved that what the others are doing or saying bothers the person and the behaviour should stop.
- (3) If after this, the behaviour continues, the person who is bothered needs to tell any other people involved in the conflict that he or she plans to write any of those involved up for the judicial committee.
- (4) If after this warning, the behaviour continues, the person goes ahead and writes up any others involved in the conflict for the judicial committee.

As was confirmed through observations, when students asked a teacher to solve a conflict for them, the teacher would ask if the students had tried to solve it themselves. Educator 2 gave the example that, whenever someone came up with a problem, like someone took my pen, 'I was like ok what are you going to do about this, you need to talk to this person'. Educators tried to model principles of non-violent communication in their approach. When someone got to the point of writing somebody else up (a teacher or a student), the former filled out the first part of the judicial committee form. This part asks for a description of the conflict and for the names of the plaintiff, of others involved in the dispute, and of witnesses. The second part of the form, completed during the committee, was reserved for an agreed-upon description of the conflict and for a potential consequence. Once a plaintiff had written up someone, the judicial committee met. The plaintiff, the accused, witnesses, an assembly (open to everyone), and an elected committee, called the judicial committee, attended these meetings. According to Educator 2, this elected committee ran these meetings. He described their composition: 'whoever wants to be one of the judicial committee members puts their name down and each people [*sic*] in the class gets to vote for them, two boys and two girls, so four people in total you get to vote for'. He added that a teacher completed this elected committee. This group of five changed after a certain number of conflicts had been resolved. This group, along with the plaintiff, the witness, and the accused, had the rights to vote on an agreed account of the dispute and on a consequence when needed, while other members of the assembly could suggest consequences and raise objections. Among the elected committee, a different person for every judicial committee volunteered to chair. According to Educator 2, 'the chair of the committee can kick anybody out without any warning'. In addition to keeping order during the committees, the chair was responsible for opening the floor to speakers.

These committees followed a certain number of steps. These steps had been, and were being agreed upon, democratically during the aforementioned class meetings (e.g. a student suggested that the school adopt judicial committees to solve conflict during such a meeting). An observed judicial committee initiated by Abbey about a vulgar story told by Chris, in which a character was named Abbey, provides an example of the steps followed during committees. After the chair had given the floor in chronological order to Abbey, the accused, and the witnesses so that they could tell their side of the story, everyone agreed on what had happened rapidly as Chris confirmed Abbey's side of the story. Participants including Abbey, Liz, Dan, Chris, Shannon, Paul, Mia, Diana,

and Educator 2, all wanted to find a solution to the conflict. However, many disagreed on how to resolve the conflict. A debate took place when participants presented divergent points of view on the solution to undertake. Shannon wished that Abbey learned to deal with the conflict by herself. Paul suggested that Chris be banned from the lounge area for a week. In the end, Diana, Mia, Dan, and Chris agreed on an apology, though they argued on the form, the content, and the length of the apology. As no objection arose after, this ended the committee.

According to the judicial committee forms, the issues with which judicial committees dealt with comprised name-calling, the respect of building-related rules, computer use, and an attempt to reach consensus during class meetings. All judicial committees finished with a resolution either after the assembly had voted or had addressed a major objection. The first observed judicial committee lasted 30 minutes, while the other ones were closer to an hour in length. While attendance to judicial committees was optional, the three observed judicial committees gathered an average of 15 students, while, on some occasions, some participants listened to some parts, then left and came back later.

Experiencing the Judicial Committees

Students' experiences with judicial committees mostly comprised various emotions while engaging in conflict resolution processes and adapting conflict resolution skills.

Students' reported mixed feelings during judicial committees. Most students experienced a combination of similar feelings that comprised appreciation, concern, and empowerment during judicial committees. Their appreciation related to these committees in general and to some of their aspects. For instance, Karen asserted, 'I like watching [these committees] ... I like to vote. I like to listen to people's story'. Similarly, Liz stated, 'I am really argumentative and I like to discuss things that different people might have different opinions about'. Some participants enjoyed the functioning of judicial committees. On the topic, John declared, 'It is a good idea ... it is not just the teacher going like "you got that, you got that" [pointing]. It is like the committee who gets to decide on what the problem is, what the punishment is'. Here, John's words also provide an example of students who appreciate the conflict resolution steps that preceded judicial committees. Many participants were pleased with the efficiency of judicial committees. For example, after saying that judicial committees 'help most of the time', Mia justified her statement, 'because it helps to solve problems'. Some liked what they learned in these committees.

In the process, students also had various concerns regarding judicial committees. Some of these concerns regarded the school community, conflict resolution, and the functioning of judicial committees. As an example, when asked why he attended judicial committees, Alex answered that he 'wanted to know what happens in the school' while Paul said, 'I was just basically observing to see if [the conflict] was solved properly'. Participants were also worried in relation to aspects of the judicial committees. Some were disquieted that so few students resorted to the judicial committees. Indeed, Shannon declared, 'Usually, [judicial committees] don't happen too often, so most problems don't get worked out'.

Most students also felt empowered when taking part in judicial committees, feeling as though they had some control over their situations. As an example of empowerment, Liz reported:

I think it is better ... with the students discussing it, solving it and deciding things ... I like that it gives the person who is accused and the person who accuses the option to, with the help of [a teacher], and, in a more calmer environment, to solve it themselves and decide on a punishment that they both are ok with.

Hence, when taking part in democratic activities, students experienced for the most part a combination of feelings that included enjoyment, worry, and empowerment. Some students had in some cases other feelings that were not common to everyone's experience, though these feelings remain possibilities that can arise during such activities. Some participants experienced dislike about certain components of these committees. For instance, Donna admitted being uncomfortable sharing a problem with the assembly of a committee, 'Whenever something happens to me, I really don't like a bunch of other people to get involved and the judicial committee has everybody in the entire school involved'. When making an accusation or being

accused, students accepted their roles. In addition, some students empathised with others in some cases. On that matter, Liz asserted after describing that students took lightly Educator 1's problem with Patrick coming in early:

We [students] don't care if a student is out in the hall when he is not supposed to be because it is not our responsibility, but the [educators] do care and it is their responsibility and if we are in the hall, they get in trouble, so it was kind of unfair and [Educator 1's problem] should have been seen as more important. Just because [Educator 1] is just an [educator], what bothers and upset [this educator] should still be important in this class.

Hence, some students also experienced during the democratic activities, on some occasions, feelings that were specific to their experiences.

What students did during the judicial committees. Participants indicated that they managed to solve most of their conflicts in the steps leading up to a judicial committee. For instance, Donna enumerated many strategies that she employed to grapple with her interpersonal problems. In some instances, she decided to ignore people nagging her. However, she declared that, in most cases, she went to a teacher to set up a discussion with the other party or tried to work out the conflict herself. In an interview, she said, 'Once, I was feeling excluded from the group, like me and Mel and Danielle, and we worked that out'. When asked how they worked it out, she replied, 'First of all, we talked about it ... I explained how I felt and we all said that we were sorry'. Congruent with that, Karen admitted that she tried to solve her conflict on her own, 'I have had a lot of conflicts. Believe me. I had times, but I don't really feel like bringing them to the judicial committee sometimes. I feel like I can deal with them on my own'. To answer how she dealt with her conflict, she said, 'I would just talk to the person or I would just let it go or say I don't want to be friends for some time'. Karen provided an example:

I have written up someone [for a judicial committee] I remember we got in a fight. We talked afterwards so we did not do the committee ... we solved it on our own.

Hence, in some instances, conflicting parties had a second discussion about the issue and solved it in time before the committee could meet. Karen mentioned how Peter and she resolved their conflict: 'the next day, Peter came up to me and he apologised to me, so I apologised to him so we just kind of made up'. Thus, for the most part, people put into practice various conflict resolution strategies without having to take the steps that would lead to a judicial committee. Some students talked immediately with the people with whom they had a conflict. When conflicting parties had such discussions successfully, these people talked about what happened, shared their feelings and intentions, apologised and made up. In other instances, some students brought their conflicts to educators right away to be asked if they had tried to address the issue within themselves.

Students mostly engaged in decision-making and conflict resolution processes during judicial committees while experiencing a combination of feelings. According to judicial committee forms, more than a half of the participants of the study made an accusation that led to a judicial committee during the course of the year. During judicial committees, students who had specific roles, such as witness or member of the committee, followed the responsibilities associated to their roles. For instance, Patrick described his actions as an accused, 'I said that [Educator 1's accusation] was pretty much what I did' and explained he voted for Educator 1's consequence because, 'I think that [Educator 1's punishment] ... is going to fix the problem'. In accordance with Patrick's account, people who had been accused of something presented their sides of the conflict, suggested consequences on some occasions, and voted. According to Educator 2, people accused who had committed an offence had always admitted their wrongdoing when given the floor. As another example, elected members performed their tasks by contributing to the delineation of the disputes and by debating and voting on consequences. For instance, Dan stated about his role as a chair, 'I was getting the story from everyone and keeping order ... I tried to work with both stories and tried to mesh them together ... I tried to count all the votes accurately and I tried to make sure no one influences on anything'.

Participants attending committees engaged in many other ways in conflict resolution processes during the committees. During the course of the study, about 80% of the participants took part in at least one of the optional committees. They mostly followed the discussions, had

thoughts and shared opinions about the disputes, and suggested consequences. In this sense, Marc said, 'Having a whole group of people getting their opinions just helps me out to see different parts of the argument, like the other persons' side'. Students had various thoughts about the different elements going on during the committees, while listening. For instance, many students also analysed the suggested consequences for each conflict. In this sense, Dan described the consequences for which he had voted at one committee: '[the one where] Edward has to be the first out the door and that Patrick has to get some stuff [pen and paper case]. I first thought that it was too harsh and then I thought, "naaa, it is not really that harsh"'. Students, when having such thoughts, often shared their opinions on the nature of conflicts and suggested consequences. As an example, Diana declared about the problem affecting Abbey, 'I said to give Chris a restraining order'. Hence, students largely engaged in conflict resolution processes during committees by commenting on disputes after having thought about the issues.

Students' reported and observed adaptations during the judicial committees. Students reported changing in several ways after having participated in conflict resolution processes during judicial committees. Every interviewed student modified how they participated in judicial committees. Many changed how they voted. Shannon affirmed in relation to the beginning of the year, 'sometimes I felt like voting what my friends were voting for' and declared, with respect to how she voted at the moment of the interview, 'mostly, I vote on what I want to [happen]'. Several students also declared modifying how they fulfilled their roles during committees. After saying that she felt confident chairing meetings, Karen mentioned, 'I was a chair at one of the first class meetings. I wanted to be a chair because I thought that it was interesting. I did not really know much about being a chair so I had a lot of people there to help me'. Karen's words exemplify how learning occurred for many students when interested in taking part in some aspects of the meetings. Students also changed what they did at the school after the selection of consequences. For example, Patrick described how he complied with the consequences issued to him, which was to carry drawing material at all times: 'I have been carrying a pen'.

How students felt about various issues also evolved in many cases after participation in judicial committees. Some students changed their feelings about sharing their opinions. For instance, Patrick mentioned, 'I have been doing a lot more going on forums on the internet and making comments on forums because I find commenting a lot more fun now'. Some students adapted how they felt about some offences discussed during judicial committees. On the matter, Marc affirmed:

Name calling or insulting, well, before, I would not have done much about it. I would have kind of gotten angry at the person ... [judicial committees] are kind of helping me to open up to the other person and kind of not make me build up as much anger.

Some changed their perspectives on the nature of disagreements. In this sense, John, stated, 'I used to feel like people were mean to me when they shut down my ideas and now I just think that they have other ideas and they'd rather do other things'. Several students also changed their stances on certain consequences to choose during these committees.

Most of the students modified how they participated in conflict resolution processes. Some adapted their contribution to the judicial committees. For instance, Shannon expressed that she did not suggest any consequences when she first participated in the committees and that she has started proposing punishments more constantly in the recent committees. Most of the interviewed students affirmed that they changed how they grappled with interpersonal conflicts after following the conflict resolution steps in place at the school. For example, Mia stated:

I was just throwing the f-word around or calling each other mean names, and, now, it is just talking. It is not fighting. It is not swearing. It is just calmly saying to someone else how you feel.

Likewise, some students adapted strategies to prevent conflicts. For example, Marc admitted, '[judicial committees] do help me think before I speak a lot more often'. He described an occasion where that happened after attending a judicial committee where the central issue was name-calling: 'I did have thoughts running into my head that, like my friends [and I] were kind of ripping on my other friends and stuff like that [so I did] not say that as much as before'. In the interview, he articulated those thoughts as 'it might turn the other way or maybe they might think it is

offensive'. Some other students began taking matters into their own hands to solve their own conflicts. Congruent with this, when asked how she solved her problem, Donna replied, 'we have private meetings with Educator 2 or just try to work it out ourselves' and, then, she admitted that she had just started to resort to the judicial committees.

Hence, while mostly feeling glad, concerned, and empowered, students engaged in multiple ways to conflict resolution processes in the context of judicial committees, and modified how they went about such conflicts.

What Judicial Committees Mean for Citizenship Education

I will argue that judicial committees, such as those that I investigated, are significant for citizenship education, most specifically for conflict resolution, both in free schools and in conventional ones. To achieve this, I will highlight how these committees, and the conflict resolution steps inherent to them, represent democratic processes during which the enactment and the learning of conflict resolution skills represent a key possibility that can arise.

Indeed, the steps associated to judicial committees correspond to teaching tools for peace and conflict resolution that are coherent with many of the suggestions articulated by the various researchers in the reviewed selected studies. They are congruent with Hettler and Johnston's call for the development of conflict resolution activities framed around experiential education (2009). The observed judicial committees involved students in experiences and thinking processes that were directly connected to conflict resolution. In other words, students were the main agents of conflict resolution at the school. On this issue, Liz said, 'it is better that we kind of get to do [conflict resolution] as a group with the students discussing it, solving it and deciding things'. Students had to try to resolve their conflicts on their own, mostly by talking to one another, and, then, if that did not work, they resorted to judicial committees where more students were involved in three key steps. They had to agree upon an account of the conflict, to debate to choose a consequence to solve the situation, and to vote. Students' involvement in debates, and votes over the selection of consequences, also implies that the judicial committees were consistent with Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri's call for students' engagement in the decision-making process (2005). Students' participation in the decision-making was not limited to the conflict themselves, they could also decide democratically, along with teachers, about the functionality of judicial committees since, as indicated earlier, these committees had been initiated by a student during a class meeting. Moreover, the procedures associated to judicial committees enabled teachers to model pro-social behaviour as suggested by Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri (2005). For instance, Educator 2 mentioned, 'we used that sort of empathy non-violent communication and all that to try to discuss the [conflict]'. Based on my observations, not only did the educator try to follow non-violent communication principles, they also encouraged students to adopt this communication strategy. Lastly, Mia's comment that, '[the judicial committee] helps to solve problems', also indicates that these committees obviously enable students and teachers to solve what Carlsson-Paige and Lantieri called the conflicts lived at home as a first step towards peace in the long run globally (2005).

Most importantly, participation in the judicial committees allowed students to develop new conflict resolution approaches and citizenship skills. One of Karen's remarks illustrates a recurring theme that emerged during most interviews about how most participants modified how they resolve conflicts. She said:

I was just throwing the f-word around or calling each other mean names, and now it is just talking, it is not fighting, it is not swearing. It is just calmly saying to someone else how you feel.

Students largely started to talk with one another, to share their feelings and to apologise, in order to solve their disputes. Additionally, many became more critically engaged after participating in debates during judicial committees and during class meetings. In line with this, like many, Casey said, 'I have kind of started to participate more in the meetings and share my opinion [after] decisions were made about ... things that really concern me'. Similarly, many changed how they went about voting. For instance, Liz commented, 'now, even if I would be the only person voting for [a thing that I want], I would still vote for it'.

Even though the conflict resolution that I investigated took place in a context specific to free schools, many of the enabling constraints that gave rise to the judicial committees can be implemented in conventional schools. For example, at Canadian Free School, students enjoyed a large freedom that allowed them to have many interactions with each other. It is in this context that conflicts arose and that students learned about conflict resolution, while the steps inherent to judicial committees implied using these conflicts as opportunities to teach about conflict resolution. Furthermore, while most interactions did not involve disputes, students, assisted by teachers, also gained new perspectives about how to interact with one another. For conventional schools, this means that, when students mostly have to remain silent in classes, and when most interactions between them happen away from teachers, possibilities for teachers to guide students in their conflict resolution remain scarce, although encouraging group activities during class time, could provide more chances to witness students' interactions, and to suggest ways to further these interactions and to resolve conflicts. While participants in the study enjoyed a freedom of speech in the school, they had room in the school to take the time to resolve their conflict. Hence, conventional schools could enhance students' engagement in conflict resolution by offering a space for this in classrooms (e.g. a portion of time during a course). Moreover, exploring the cracks in the curriculum and in the schedule, such schools could put at the disposition of students optional judicial committees, like those at Canadian Free School, during lunch hours to empower more students in conflict resolution.

In conclusion, after I conducted an ethnographic case study using tools of complexity thinking, I argued that students had experienced mixed emotions, including appreciation, concerns, and empowerment, while engaging in conflict resolution processes during judicial committees in a free school. I also claimed that, in the process, students had modified their strategies with respect to conflict resolution. With the idea of learning by doing, I contended that such changes in terms of conflict resolution could happen when schools encouraged students to resolve their own conflicts using tools suggested by teachers, and with their peers and teachers, notably through judicial committees. As such, judicial committees represent one strategy that educators could use to prevent some students from having a fate similar to that of John, the aforementioned Swedish prisoner.

Note

[1] To protect educators' anonymity, I chose to assign a number to each of them.

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