

# The model of the student helper under discussion: opinion of participating students and their beneficiaries<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The present study forms part of a broad research effort on evaluating the *Student helpers* program and its repercussions on school climate and on students' social skills at Secondary schools, carried out during schoolyears 2000-01 and 2001-02. This was partially subsidized by the European Community within the framework of the *Socrates Comenius* program for improving school coexistence, where responsible evaluating universities participate together with the schools where the program is being implanted. Results from the first year of school intervention were evaluated at the School of Educational Psychology at the University of Braga (Portugal), and the School of Psychology at the *Autónoma* University of Madrid continues the process.

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## **Abstract**

*In recent years in Spain there has been a growing popular concern as well as research interest in the study of social relations pertaining to coexistence at school, including a desire to know the real incidence and nature of conflicts involved. Thus, a great variety of school interventions have been underway, with the aim of reducing the incidence of conflicts and of improving the interventions themselves. In the realm of educational innovation, programmes based on “peer education” and help between peers, mainly from the Anglosaxon tradition, have become increasingly widespread at schools around our country. The following paper addresses first year assessment of a peer helper program implemented in a secondary school in Madrid. The qualitative methodology applied for data collection was the group discussion, reflecting opinions of the students directly involved in the program, both the student helpers themselves and other students at the school, based on their own experience as the protagonists or beneficiaries of the program. They underscore positive aspects as well as make critical judgments about their own performance and about the program, they show how direct involvement in the program is effective in developing social skills, and they open the way for improving the intervention itself.*

**Keywords:** *school climate, program assessment, adolescence, education and development, discussion groups, peer help, conflict resolution*

## Introduction

School climate, from the point of view of interventions for improving interpersonal relationships between the different groups which make up the educational community, is a topic being addressed by educational psychologists for several decades, in a large number of countries and from a breadth of theoretical approaches (for one of the most well-known references in the area of Social Psychology and Education, see Hargreaves, 1978).

In recent years, rapid social change in Spain has had important repercussions in educational institutions, one of the most visible examples being complaints from a sector of teachers—largely from Secondary Education—about the appearance of coexistence conflicts which make it difficult to carry on teaching and learning processes in the classroom. The National Report on School Violence by the Ombudsman (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000), does not confirm the alarm reflected by some of the media, since it reports only low incidence of violent behaviors; however, it does show a high frequency of behaviors related to lack of respect for basic coexistence norms. Thus, among the data currently available, note the opinion of 71.0% of Secondary teachers who indicate that students “hinder them from teaching class” (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000) or who “do not respect their authority” (53.8%, Martín, Rodríguez & Marchesi, 2003). In the same sense, another report that comes from comparing incidence of the problem among 37 countries from the OECD (TIMSS Report, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 1995), situates Spain above average in the group (39.3%), and in second place in incidence of the problem of disruptive behaviors in the classroom (above 65.0%). The unmistakable unease that is reflected here reveals the arduous task of controlling the classroom, and the difficulties of a broad sector of teachers in adapting school content to the needs of their students, keeping an appropriate climate for learning, and developing habits of respect for coexistence norms.

The intervention approach presented here falls into the interdisciplinary area addressed by traditions of Developmental Psychology and Educational Psychology, regarding applied discipline in the context of formal education. Other related traditions of theory and research—such as pedagogy or educational sociology, or conflict theory—include relevant contributions which fill out the theoretical framework underlying the peer help programs whose

assessment results after one year of experimentation at a secondary school will be presented below.

## **Programs based on peer help systems**

### *Theoretical framework of peer education*

School climate, understood as a social system (Freiberg & Stein, 1999) that encompasses social interactions, relationships and norms among the members of the educational community (Creemers & Reezigt, 1999), is upset by the appearance of conflicts between teacher and student, or between teacher and group of students, just to note the most obvious examples. Nonetheless, if the school and the classroom are considered contexts of coexistence and learning, where relationships and interactions between people and groups are sustained over time, the appearance of conflicts is inevitable. Thus, Jares (2001) contributes a definition of conflict as “a type of situation where persons or social groups seek or perceive opposite goals, affirm antagonistic values or have diverging interests”. This perception of conflict as something inevitable in social interaction opens a new perspective beyond simply considering it damaging for good coexistence relationships--its recovery as an object of teaching and learning for preventing negative school climates (Funes, 2000), thus converting it into an indispensable tool for training to promote pupils' social and moral development.

Peer help programs start from a conception of education that promotes personal and social development that can make significant contributions to attaining the three rights of childhood: protection from abuse, provision for a reasonable quality of life and learning how to participate in a democratic society (CRDU, 1994, quoted in Cowie & Wallace, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. From this point of view, they promote prosocial behavior among students by generating friendship behaviors, emotional support and help between groups of pairs. Their specific objectives are improvement of communication between students, and between teachers and students, constructive resolution of daily coexistence conflicts, and reduction in the number of bullying cases. The set of activities aims to create a cohesive school culture around values of mutual respect, dialogue and tolerance; consequently, a concern for the socio-emotional wellbeing of students and of all the members of the educational community comes to the service of change processes within the school as an institution.

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<sup>2</sup> CRDU - UK Agenda for Children. Children's Rights Development Unit.

From the point of view of adolescent development, important changes in social and moral areas which are being produced during this stage give rise to autonomous, self-regulated actions over one's self and one's physical, interpersonal and social environment (Onrubia, 1995), thus favoring the development of self-reflection abilities relating to one's self and one's interaction with the environment. The capacity to make judgments and criticisms, typical of formal-operational thought found in the adolescent, places him or her at an ideal time for analyzing conflicts and exercising the sophisticated social skills involved, especially the capacity for empathy, for putting oneself in the place of someone else and experiencing their feelings: essential conditions for peaceful, constructive resolution of coexistence conflicts at school. This way, through this type of action, we recover the enormous potential opened up by operations on operations (Inhelder & Piaget, 1955, quoted in Moreno & del Barrio, 2000). The student helper program, then, becomes a powerful intervention tool that allows for experiencing and improving social skills through practice, as is confirmed by studies performed to date (Andrés, Barrios & Martín, 2005; Andrés, Gaymard & Martín, 2005; Andrés & Martín, 2002; Benítez, 2003; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Salmivalli, 1999).

#### *Organization of the student helper program*

Recently introduced in our country (Fernández, Villaoslada & Funes, 2002), student helper programs have been widely implanted in English-speaking countries (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). They consist of organizing groups of students chosen by their classmates according to certain prosocial characteristics, for the purpose of collaborating in conflict resolution. As a function of this objective they receive specific training in social skills and conflict resolutions techniques, while their daily performance is supervised by teachers committed to the project.

The team of student helpers begins to function at the beginning of the schoolyear and continues for only one academic year, so as to ensure rotation of students. Fernández and Andrés (2001) indicate that "the idea is not to create an elite group of prosocial experts, but to generate the possibility for the biggest possible percentage of students to experience the model". Indeed, according to these authors, data indicate that adolescents share their problems with peers before they would with the adults that they relate to (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000). By exercising the student helper role, social and moral developmental opportunities open up which would otherwise be less likely to appear in normal interaction contexts, commonly limited to the more reduced scope of friendship relations.

On the other hand, with regard to data that we analyze later on, we must keep in mind two essential characteristics of student helper interventions: respect for the confidentiality of the cases they address, and the need to refer those cases that, due to their seriousness, do not pertain to this realm of action. So it is that Cowie and Wallace (2000) have created a minimal code of cases for student helpers, indicating what must be communicated to teachers responsible for coordination of the project, redirecting the cases to other intervention channels when necessary. Here we find cases of students with severe psychological difficulties, problems related to sex education or teenage pregnancies, suicidal problems, and so forth. Fernández, Villaoslada and Funes (2002) add cases of domestic abuse, sexual abuse and economic extortion using threats.

## **Method**

### *Evaluation for improving the intervention: discussion groups*

From the practical point of view of intervention, the design of the evaluation program involves two complementary aspects with distinct objectives: evaluation of the program's perceived effectiveness (to what extent were objectives reached), and evaluation of the program itself (to what extent the system is adequate for reaching those objectives). According to these criteria, the use of discussion groups was considered adequate. This qualitative methodology is relatively new, but is recommended in the literature specialized in evaluation of intervention programs (Buendía, Colás & Hernández, 1998; López, 2005). In this particular case, evaluating a peer help program, the methodological option has proven its adequacy for our objectives. Evaluation required accurate collection of opinions, beliefs and attitudes, both from the students directly participating (helpers) as well as students who were not acting as helpers (their same-grade classmates, acting as observers).

According to López (2005), this type of study seeks to understand "people's train of thought in the context of mutual communication ... [they] don't limit themselves to responding true or false to a certain affirmation, rather they communicate with one another, constructing a social discourse full of meaning". If the evaluation is carried out in different follow-up phases, the program is a new experience and it is expected to continue (as in this case), group discussion allows the researchers to go deeper into the matter being investigated. The group format presents certain advantages for our interests. First, the discourse being collected is not

simple statements but communication, as López (2005) explains. That is, students converse among themselves, add ideas, correct one another and even contradict each other. Thus, individual experiences, not exempt from the influence of personal variables, join together to form the collective experience which more realistically illustrates the evolution of the program. Second, organization of discussion groups is a more economical methodology in terms of time involved in collecting and analyzing the data.

### *Participants and procedure*

On one hand, information is obtained by generating discussion in three groups, one for each year in school (Grades 7, 8 and 9), where program members (helpers) participate. Meetings with the helpers, held in designated school classrooms, were carried out at two points in time. The first time was after receiving specific skills training and guidance in conflict resolution, but before the intervention had begun. The second was at the end of the schoolyear, when the intervention experience has been gained and its benefits and problems observed.

On the other hand, another three discussion groups were organized, using students who were classmates from the same year in school as the helpers, students who acted as witnesses of the interventions taking place during the course of the year and who ultimately would be the beneficiaries of the program implementation. These group meetings, with volunteers from among the non-helper students, took place only at the end of the schoolyear. We included these students in the sample in order to compare their perspective on the program to that of the participants, which would be less objective.

One or two researchers led the meetings, which lasted approximately 45 minutes. The meeting began with a brief presentation and explanation of the motives behind it, assuring confidentiality of opinions, encouraging participation, and insisting that all contributions were of interest. Later, recordings of the meeting were transcribed and content analysis was performed. Results are given under the appropriate heading below.

### *Material*

In order to guide the discussion and keep it from drifting into matters unrelated to the program and its progress, a question script was developed which addresses a series of aspects or dimensions to be taken into account in the evaluation. The following table shows the dimensions or aspects investigated, together with a few examples.

**Table 1. Program Evaluation Dimensions**

<b>ECHO, IMPACT, AWARENESS</b>	Do you think that the figure of the student helper is well-known around the school?
<b>FREQUENCY AND TYPES OF CASES</b>	Have you intervened in many cases? What kind? What kinds were more difficult/easier when it came to intervening?
<b>TRAINING</b>	Keeping in mind the conflicts in which you intervened, do you consider the training useful? Would you add, eliminate or replace any of the training content?
<b>TIME</b>	Have you devoted much time to intervention? Does it require a big effort from you?
<b>PLACE</b>	Where do you feel most comfortable when you intervene? (classroom, schoolyard, hallway, home, off school grounds ...)
<b>EMOTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR ONESELF</b>	How you feel when you intervene? And after the intervention? Do you think you have learned something by being a student helper? Have you improved your personal relationships?
<b>OTHERS' REACTIONS TO THE INTERVENTION</b>	Have you found difficulties that kept you from intervening or that didn't allow you to intervene the way you intended to? How have your classmates and teachers responded?
<b>ASSESSMENT OF THE STUDENT HELPER AND SELECTION SYSTEM</b>	How you do think others perceive you? Do they understand the figure of the student helper? Do your teachers and classmates value the student helper positively? How did you choose the student helpers in your class? Does it seem like a good system or would you propose other selection system?
<b>PROSPECTS</b>	Do you think the the team of student helpers should continue functioning in the future? Could their performance be improved? How? If it were up to you, would you put the system in place again next school year?
<b>EVALUATION</b>	Score the Socrates Program as if it were a student: In this evaluation, does it pass? What grade would you give it? Would you add any observations?

## Results

### *The program according to the pupils*

The abundance of information obtained through the discussion groups was grouped into three large blocks. The first block gathers student opinions regarding implementation and functioning of the model; the second, their view regarding the figure of the student helper; finally, the third has to do with practice itself: types of conflicts which arose, how they were confronted and their assessment.

### *Introduccion and development of the Student Helper model*

Program Dissemination. Whether they participated in the program or not, students concurred in indicating the need to better publicize the program around the school. Student helpers from Grade 7 maintained that even at the end of the schoolyear, both their classmates and their teachers were unfamiliar with the intervention program. As for their classmates, they claimed that they only found out who the student helpers were in their own class, whereas their teach-



ers not only lacked information but also interest in finding out more. Exceptions were noted, naming teachers who used their homeroom class periods to present the program. Student helpers from Grade 8 observed from the beginning what the younger group saw after the intervention: that their classmates only knew the student helpers from their own class, and this by necessity, since they participated in choosing them. Already at the beginning of the program, the 9<sup>th</sup> graders proposed several channels for dissemination (chats, posters, explanatory brochures), as well as indicators to facilitate identification of student helpers (pins, stickers, logos). In the second discussion session, although insisting that there was insufficient promotion, they distinguish between classmates who did not know about it, and others, who being informed, were not system “users” or “supporters”. “The others know that there are student helpers. They have to know, they were the ones to choose them! Even if the homeroom teacher has not told them about it in class, they’ve heard around school what we are doing. The thing is lots of them don’t want to admit that they have problems and you can tell because their mood changes. You have to go after them and sometimes they don’t want to tell you what’s wrong” (Sara, student helper from 9<sup>th</sup> grade).

The opinion of non-helper students is relevant in this aspect, since it gives feedback on program repercussions at the school. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, they indicate that only those few who are participating know about the program, while the rest are uninformed, either completely and relatively so. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they think that the required confidentiality could account to a large extent for the lack of information. Finally, non-helper students from 9<sup>th</sup> grade insist on the importance of dissemination, admitting their own ignorance.

Selection of student helpers. In the first discussion groups that took place, student helpers only recounted the election system (a classroom vote after voluntary presentation of candidates), without making any assessment. However, at the end of the schoolyear, they show a certain dissatisfaction with the procedure used, a dissatisfaction shared by the non-helper students, who also added some criticisms. Students from 7<sup>th</sup> grade criticize the tendency to choose friends and acquaintances without thinking whether they are qualified for the position or not, despite the fact that they notice an advantage in this: the student helper need not make a special effort to gain others’ confidence, he or she already has it. The 8<sup>th</sup> graders come out against the method used for selection, but they do not propose alternatives. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders more constructively propose that a description of the ideal student be offered so that classmates select who best fits the profile, regardless of any question of friendship, and even sug-

gesting that the homeroom teacher provide guidelines for the selection: “In our class we chose the student helper just like we choose the class representative. It shouldn’t be like that, because it’s not the same thing. No one thinks about what the election is for.” (David, non-helper student from 8<sup>th</sup> grade)

Training of student helpers. The student helpers recognized the need for training before intervening in conflicts. Some of them mention content areas that were worked on. The youngest helpers considered “listening” to be key. Student helpers from 9<sup>th</sup> grade, in addition to mentioning skills like this, added the acquisition of certain norms or principles that regulate intervention in conflicts, such as “impartiality” or “confidentiality”. The 8<sup>th</sup> graders, besides recognizing that the training was essential for intervening, report that it also serves for other purposes such as launching new friendships or strengthening relationships already underway. At the end of the school year, the older students speak of the overall usefulness of the training in order to participate in a helping service: “Staying at the hostel is helpful. It gives you a base for intervening later. You learn to listen, for example, which is very important. But besides that, you make friends with the classmates who go and you learn to make new friends at other places and to get along better with the friends you have” (Nataly, student helper in 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

Those who did not play the role of student helper dared to give opinions even though they have few objective criteria for evaluating the training. The 7<sup>th</sup> graders feel the training for the student helpers was useless since they never took their position seriously. 8<sup>th</sup> graders feel the training given was insufficient. For the older students, who consider training essential for intervention, “no training is ever enough” and it will always be useful.

Program continuity. All students without exception support the continuity of the program, although some indicate the need to make changes. Student helpers from 7<sup>th</sup> grade propose concrete changes: initiate the program at the same time the school year begins, organize more than one excursion for providing training, and consider the possibility of letting a student helper continue a second year. At the end of the year they express a desire to remain connected to the program, suggesting it be more widely publicized and, in relation to that, to try to increase the number of interventions. Student helpers from 8<sup>th</sup> grade did not add much to this, they insist on continuing the program, changing only the selection process. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders from the start suggested a series of improvements in implementing the program.

Unlike the younger students, who look for changes that particularly affect the student helpers themselves, the older students think more generally about how to approve the overall functioning of the system. At the end of the school year, this group expands the list of changes needed for maintaining the program, recommending: use of the homeroom period for promoting it, doing program follow-up, and looking for support from teachers.

The non-helper students from all groups, like the 8<sup>th</sup> grade student helpers, support continuity of the program but only with modification of the selection process. Non-helper students from 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade suggest new changes. They concur in that student helper meetings should be held. The younger students believe that exchanging experiences could help them learn from each other. The older students think that they might be useful for finding measures to help resolve difficult cases. Furthermore, 7<sup>th</sup> graders propose an increase in number of helpers, and getting a real commitment from them to exercise the tasks entrusted to them. Older students speak of creating or reserving a designated space in the school for their meetings or even for carrying out certain interventions.

Program scoring. To judge from the scores, student helpers were more satisfied with the program at the beginning of the schoolyear than at the end, although in any case scores were higher than those given by the non-helpers at both times. At the beginning of the school year, when training is more recent, student helpers from 7<sup>th</sup> grade score the program Outstanding, the highest rating, based on their own learning. At the end of the school year, the score is considerably lower, although still in the “passing” category. Those from 8<sup>th</sup> grade score the program Very Good, second highest rating, at both discussion times. At both times they resist giving a higher score since they observe certain lacks: at the initial meeting, a lack of dissemination; at the second meeting, a lack of commitment and seriousness in some of their student helper peers. Agreeing with the score assigned by the latter group, the 9<sup>th</sup> graders evaluate according to short-term accomplishments attained. In this sense, they consider that the program promotes companionship, although they still must get their classmates to confide in them more. As with the youngest students, their scoring drops at the end of the schoolyear.

Taking into account the overall average score from those students who did not belong to the system, the program deserves merely a “pass”. 7<sup>th</sup> graders assigned quite varied scores, from the highest to the lowest. For the 8<sup>th</sup> graders, the program does not manage to pass. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders, who were usually more constructive in their interventions, made the

distinction between evaluating the program and its objectives, which they passed with high marks, and the program's functioning at the school, which did not reach a passing score.

**Table 2. Results with regard to functioning of the model**

	YEAR IN SCHOOL	BEFORE THE INTERVENTION	AFTER THE INTERVENTION	
		Student Helpers	Student Helpers	Non-helpers
<b>Dissemination of the intervention program</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Recognition of the need to publicize more	Insistence on better publicizing the program Lack of interest from teachers Students unaware	Insistence on better publicizing the program Confirm lack of awareness, varies acc'd to participation
	<b>Grade 8</b>	People only know the helpers in their own class	Same opinion: Lack of general awareness, people only know the helpers from their own class	Relate dissemination problems to the program's own confidentiality requirement
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Concrete proposals for publicizing: posters, pins, etc.	Insufficient information from teachers Differences between awareness and interest in the program and its use: new proposals to expand participation	Importance of dissemination from confirmation of their own unawareness
<b>Selection of student helpers</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Reported procedure without comment	Discontent with the selection system	Discontent and "soft" criticism; some advantages observed
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Reported procedure without comment	Discontent with the selection system	Discontent and "hard" criticism; distrust without alternatives
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Reported procedure, related it to other election systems	Discontent with the selection system	Discontent with the selection: "constructive" criticism with proposals for improvement
<b>Usefulness of training</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Useful for intervention	Useful for intervention	Distrust of the training and little interest
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Useful for intervention and personal development	Useful for intervention and personal development, positive consequences for interpersonal relationships	Useful, but insufficient
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Reflection on useful content for intervention	Global utility of the training in relation to the student helper's task	Very highly valued: essential for intervention
<b>Program continuity</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Support for continuity and proposals for improvement	Desire to stay connected to the program: variety of proposals for <i>program</i> improvement	Support for continuity and changes to selection system
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Support for continuity of the program	Continuity and proposals for modifying the selection process	Support for continuity and changes to selection system with proposals for improvement
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Support for continuity and proposals for improvement	Continuity and broad variety of proposals for improving both the <i>figure of student helper</i> and the <i>program</i>	Support for continuity and changes to selection system with proposals for improvement
<b>Scoring</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Outstanding	Drop in scoring, but passes	Scores vary from 0 to 9
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Above average, lacks noted	Above average, lacks noted	Pass
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Above average, lacks noted	Drop in scoring, but passes	Distinction between the <i>program</i> (passes) and its <i>functioning</i> (does not pass)

*The figure of the student helper*

The role of the student helper. Opinions of the student helpers and non-helpers are contrary in their assessment about the former's dedication to their position. In the helper group, the perception of effort required by the role increases as a function of age. At the beginning of the intervention, student helpers from Grade 7 do not note any further effort beyond attending the training. For the 8<sup>th</sup> grade helpers, adopting the student helper role involved greater effort since they reported interventions practically on a daily basis. The older students consider that being a good helper involves a desire to better oneself so as to act as a model for other classmates. "You have to be careful, you must always be neutral, superpatient and try to be a better person every day, because you are an example for others and that isn't easy" (Karina, 9<sup>th</sup> grade student helper).

Students who did not participate directly in the program specifically denounced the small effort made by the helpers, and, as on other occasions, the lack of commitment and seriousness in their interventions.

Self-assessment of the student helper. Student helpers, as the older ones clearly explain, confirmed that the experience was satisfying more on account of the benefits received personally than for what others could perceive. Among the individual benefits, the younger ones speak of the possibility of establishing new and better relationships and showing a more respectful behavior towards teachers. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade helpers highlight what they learned from the training and from the intervention itself. At the end of the school year, all of them report having felt useful, especially those in 7<sup>th</sup> grade who speak of a rewarding effort, especially if the parties in conflict are grateful for the intervention.

The student helper assessed by other students and by teachers. In the beginning, student helpers feel that they are not sufficiently valued. At the end of the school year, they confirm their initial perception and try to illustrate the situation. 7<sup>th</sup> graders report that most of their classmates with problems did not turn to them for help. The only ones who do so are those who know them and are their friends, so they often found themselves forced to take initiative. 8<sup>th</sup> graders confirm the same thing and add that some classmates even rejected their help. They state the some teachers undervalue their work; on occasions they not only did not facilitate it, they even hindered them from accomplishing it. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders tried to explain the reason for

such lack of consideration. They feel that when they became helpers, their classmates no longer considered them peers, giving them a higher status, closer to the teachers. Like the 8<sup>th</sup> graders, they note that some teachers actually obstruct some interventions; they usually cut problems short by acting punitively. “The teachers want to do things their own way, they don’t acknowledge what we are doing. They do what they are used to doing. If someone does something wrong, they kick them out of class, they punish him ... things like that. I wanted to talk to a boy in class and the teacher didn’t let me. He told me that it wasn’t the right time and that it was already decided. I stood up to him and told him that he had not elected me, my classmates did. But he no longer let me intervene in class, he asked me to stop interrupting, and reminded me who was in charge” (V́ctor, 9<sup>th</sup> grade student helper). The opinion of the non-helper students showed that the helpers were not mistaken in their perceptions.

**Table 3. Results with regard to the figure of student helper: assessment of the role**

	YEAR IN SCHOOL	BEFORE THE INTERVENTION	AFTER THE INTERVENTION	
		Student Helpers	Student Helpers	Non-helpers
<b>Involvement and consequences</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	--	Small effort, except during training	Lack of commitment from the student helpers
	<b>Grade 8</b>	--	Some effort in intervention	Lack of commitment from the student helpers
	<b>Grade 9</b>	--	Personal effort: the figure is a <i>model</i> to classmates	Lack of commitment from the student helpers
<b>Assessment of the experience by Student Helpers</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Positive, helps to improve relationships with classmates and increases respect toward teachers	Feeling of usefulness, opinion that <i>helping</i> encourages you personally, more so if the parties involved are appreciative	--
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Positive, perception of learning through the experience. Certain disappointment due to small improvements in relationships with teachers	Feeling of usefulness	--
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Positive, helps improve relationships	Personal benefits from intervention	--
<b>Assessment of the experience by classmates</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	Low: their work is only sought after by friends and acquaintances	Low on the part of most classmates They are seen as “privileged students” by some classmates	Agree with the low assessment, with suggestions for improvement using different physical spaces at school
	<b>Grade 8</b>	Low, even occasional rejection from some classmates	Most classmates clearly indifferent, the figure does not gain their confidence	Agree with low assessment
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Low, searching for an explanation for the low appreciation	Explanations related to others supposing their proximity to teachers	Agree with low assessment, propose explanations related to lack of confidence in the figure

<b>Assessment of the experience by teachers</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	--	Indifference and under-appreciation from certain teachers (occasional)	--
	<b>Grade 8</b>	--	Indifference, under-appreciation and occasional obstruction on the part of some teachers	--
	<b>Grade 9</b>	--	Occasional obstruction from some teachers who prefer to use punitive strategies	--

### *The student helper's intervention*

Types of intervention. Student helpers reported few interventions at the beginning of the program. 7<sup>th</sup> grade helpers had identified two types of conflicts: fights between students and insults that a teacher had directed toward students in the classroom. While in the first case, the fights were stopped and they tried to reconcile the parties involved, the helpers did not know what to do in the second case, and they went to the homeroom teacher and head of studies, who decided to talk with the offended students, without managing to resolve the situation. 8<sup>th</sup> grade helpers also denounced a case of a teacher verbally attacking students. At first, they decided to talk with this teacher without seeking other mediators, but finally, faced with the teacher's refusal to change his attitude, they turned to the homeroom teacher, just as their 7<sup>th</sup> grade counterparts. Furthermore, they reported verbal and physical aggressions between students. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade helpers also mentioned certain thefts in addition to the other types of aggressions.

When the discussion groups were called together again, in addition to the initial cases mentioned, which continued throughout the school year, the helpers recounted all kind of aggressions which took place between students, and where they had intervened as helpers. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade they even mentioned more obscure, complex cases that they had to deal with, such as bullying and fights between students from their school with others from outside. In 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, after recounting similar interpersonal conflicts to those already mentioned, they refer to other types of cases where they also intervened. For example, some tell of having facilitated the integration of new students, and others speak of having helped students who were having trouble passing their school subjects or who had family problems.

Problems arising during the intervention, and other assessments. Most of the helpers would have liked to intervene on more occasions. The youngest helpers felt that aggressions were the most difficult kind of interventions, because one of the parties usually refused to resolve the conflict, and the collaboration of all parties involved was always necessary. For the 8<sup>th</sup> graders, the most complex interventions were those arising from conflicts between teachers and students, and cases of school failure and absenteeism. However, they highlighted the effectiveness of an intervention to help integrate a new student. The older students, shortly after the program's initiation, expressed a feeling of powerlessness when their intervention was rejected, and they observed the need to intervene in time, so that conflicts did not involve severe or irremediable consequences. As an example, they tell how a student was hit and insulted, without their interceding on his behalf, and that some days later he stopped coming to class. At the end of the schoolyear, they thought that generally their actions were timely and that the number of these actions depended largely on the characteristics of the class group. They felt that collaboration from teachers would facilitate intervention in any case.

Concurring with the helpers, the non-helpers considered that interventions were few. For the youngest students, this lack of intervention was due in part to the helpers' often not knowing how to intervene, and in part, as relates to the former issue, to others' distrust in the helpers' ability to resolve issues. Lack of helpers' initiative explained the low number of interventions for students in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades.

**Table 4. Results with regard to the figure of student helper**

**Intervention assessment by *student helpers***

	YEAR IN SCHOOL	BEFORE THE INTERVENTION	AFTER THE INTERVENTION	Interventions
		Types of Conflicts	Types of Conflicts	
Actions taken per type of conflict	Grade 7	Between students: fights	Between students: cases of threats, bullying and physical aggressions (by young people from outside the school)	Physical aggressions: dialogue Bullying: refer to Head of Studies and police
		Between class group and teacher	Class-group / teacher conflict continues	Referred to Head of Studies
	Grade 8	Between students: fights	Verbal and physical aggressions	Dialogue with the parties involved
		Between class group and teacher	Teacher insults a group of students	<i>Student helper</i> tries to speak with the teacher, later redirects to Head of Studies
			New, non-interpersonal	



			conflicts: integration of new students, support for assignments, and emotional support	
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Between students: fights and theft		
<b>Assessment of the intervention: success, difficulties, proposals for improvement</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>			Mistakes admitted in the intervention for <i>physical aggressions</i> Very effective in integration of new students Few interventions
	<b>Grade 8</b>			Difficulty recognized in intervening in teacher-student conflicts, in absenteeism and school support Few interventions
	<b>Grade 9</b>	Difficulty intervening when one of the parties rejects the intervention	New, non-interpersonal conflicts: support for students with family problems	Recognized need to act at the right moment to avoid cases becoming more serious. Greater difficulty when lacking teacher support. Few interventions.

### Intervention assessment by *non-helpers*

<b>Grade 7</b>	Lack of confidence in the figure of <i>student helper</i> Difficulty of the intervention itself
<b>Grade 8</b>	Lack of initiative on the part of the <i>student helpers</i>
<b>Grade 9</b>	Low commitment, indifference from the <i>helpers</i>

### Conclusions and discussion

Results show that students assess the program more positively when it is being introduced than after almost a year in the role of helper. However, this does not mean that they no longer appreciate the positive consequences derived from its implementation. If they did not, program continuity would not have been supported by a majority of students, even those who did not directly participate in its application. Therefore, it seems that for the boys and girls who joined in these discussion groups, the program represents a valid way to improve interpersonal relationships at school. The overall decline in scores reflects rather the influence of a year's experience in intervention, adjusting initial expectations to the difficulties presented in practice. After some time as student helpers, they find themselves able to take note of the program's weaknesses, thinking of problems that occurred and of a search for greater effectiveness.

Among aspects to be improved, both student helpers and non-helpers speak of dissemination and the selection process. Student helpers are not mistaken in thinking that there was lack of awareness of what they were doing, because those who did not participate directly in the program admitted this very thing. The non-helpers could usually identify only those helpers who belonged to their own class, the ones they had selected, but they cannot really explain what they were elected for. It is true that many students did not show interest, but also there was lack of involvement from most teachers, making promotion more difficult. This problem contributed to the appearance of erroneous conceptions and negative assessments of the role of student helper. As in other peer help program evaluations, carried out at schools in England, acceptance of the system is shown to be a basic problem which can be overcome by improving dissemination (Naylor & Cowie, 1999).

As for the selection process, there was some agreement about the need to modify it. In most classes, helpers were elected by voting for candidates who volunteered. For the non-helper students, neither are the candidates always the most capable, nor does voting for classmates ensure that these capabilities are taken into account. They considered that certain competencies were necessary, handling of certain skills in order to intervene successfully. Thus they seem to advocate selecting the candidate that best fits a certain profile. It would seem logical to think that the position should be occupied by whoever we expect can best fulfill it, which means relying on prosocial profiles closely fitted to expectations generated from the helper role. However, some experiences show that it is sometimes most beneficial, both from the individual and group perspectives, for the position to be occupied by the so-called “difficult” young people, at least temporarily and in balanced proportion within the group of helpers. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, other evaluations that were carried out (Andrés, Barrios & Martín, 2005; Andrés, Gaymard & Martín, 2005; Andrés & Martín, 2002; Benítez, 2003; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Salmivalli, 1999), and data gathered from questionnaires from the broader research of which this study forms part, confirm that adopting the role of helper entails the student’s acquisition of specific social skills.

While helpers and non helpers share the idea of improving these aspects mentioned above, their opinions of the training are quite opposite. Not in its usefulness, which both groups equally emphasize, but in its effectiveness—that is, objective results produced by it. On one hand, student helpers claim to have acquired competencies which allow them to intervene adequately as well as improve their own social life. This means they positively value

the experience. On the other hand, non-helpers do not perceive these changes in those who are directly involved in the program. On the contrary, on some occasions they point to incompetence, insisting on the lack of commitment and seriousness.

Regarding specific interventions, results indicate that as age increases, helpers add new problems to interpersonal conflicts being addressed, mainly academic and family problems. They explain that intervention in these areas is easier because it does not involve having to deal with two opposing parties. This amounts to expanding the type of interventions beyond the prototypical tasks addressed by the program, showing effectiveness, for example, in successfully welcoming new students (who often come from other countries and distant cultures), or in offering support in troubling situations (needs which are also highlighted in more difficult social contexts), etc.

Finally, the discussion groups are a source of constructive criticism reflecting the tensions which the program is subject to. In some cases this has to do with specific characteristics of the actions designed (e.g. the complex relationship between the confidentiality inherent in the cases and the need to publicize them in order to increase the number of interventions). In other cases it has to do with the profile of the helper figure, necessary for giving credibility to the program, while it is also essential to introduce students who are less suitable but whose participation in the program is highly recommended (in which case it would be necessary to carry out an exhaustive follow-up of interventions, to assure that they correspond to objectives being pursued, and of their commitment to the program). Likewise, as we have upheld elsewhere (Andrés, Barrios & Martín, 2005), it is first of all important to indicate that the relevance of these programs within the general area of improving school coexistence, beyond influencing the general climate of the educational institution, has to do with opening up new possibilities for social and moral development in adolescence, based on direct participation in the program. Second, as reflected in some students' criticisms, the type of actions being required often come into direct contradiction with the traditional school culture, where resolution of interpersonal conflicts is conceived in the framework of the asymmetrical relationships typical of the educational institution, closer to the intervention of the teacher as a sanctioning authority than to delegating part of his or her power to the students. The difficulty of changing these frequently implicit representations, with very little time in daily school life to modify them in a framework of reflection and debate, is added to specific conditions of the program itself. The objective of establishing new interpersonal relationships between students and be-

tween students and teachers is certainly ambitious, but in the framework of a new democratic school culture we cannot fail to give consideration to its relevance. Schools that experiment and evaluate these programs show us the way; the voices of the students show us, in a brilliant exercise of self-reflection, how it is possible even under complex conditions to learn about oneself in close connection with one's surroundings.

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