Article

Propelling Children's Empathy and Friendship

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Abstract: Schools play a crucial role in creating supportive and safe environments, and positive feelings are key in fostering such environments. Schools as Learning Communities, based on the dialogic participation of the whole community, are improving social cohesion. However, the underlying processes leading to such transformations remain underexplored. This article suggests that successful educational actions (SEAs) implemented in a school as a learning community, analyzed in this case study, promote positive feelings such as friendship and empathy, contributing to a safe and supportive environment. The purpose of this study was to analyze how SEAs generate friendship and empathy and their impact in the environment in a school as a learning community in Spain. To that end, the methods used were interviews with 18 students and 10 teachers, and reviews of two documentary films featuring the school. Results suggest that SEAs generate friendship and empathy among many children by promoting mutual support and sharing narratives in such dialogic settings. In addition, developing friendship and empathy contributes to reducing violent behaviors and promoting more inclusive attitudes among many students. This study concludes by providing insights on how SEAs can contribute to safe and supportive environments through fostering friendship and empathy.

Keywords: schools as learning communities; successful educational actions; friendship; empathy; school environment

1. Introduction

In what follows, a review of the literature on supportive and safe school environments and the impact of successful educational actions in promoting such environments is presented.

1.1. Fostering Supportive and Safe Educational Environments

One of the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, is to promote sustainable development, which includes fostering "sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" [1]. Schools play a major role in promoting skills and ensuring supportive and safe environments rich in cultural diversity for all students to be able to craft successful and sustainable futures. Learning in inclusive, violence-free, and supportive environments has been found to foster students' positive trajectories. For instance, such environments contribute to improving students' self-esteem and self-concept [2], academic achievements [3], academic engagement [4], and social and emotional wellbeing [5], among others. It has been found that the

quality of relationships and interactions within and outside the school among students, parents, and teachers is one of the main pillars in school environments promoting a positive climate [6,7]. Literature on school and classroom climates has shown that relationships based on feelings such as friendship are key in fostering safe and supportive environments, as it contributes to reducing conflicts [8]; to positive school experiences; and to a sense of school belonging [9], which is associated with emotional wellbeing [10]. It has also been found that friendship quality is associated with prosocial behavior towards friends [11], prosocial behavior being essential in promoting a positive school climate, and with better adjustment for early adolescents [12]. Importantly, peer relationships based on friendship act as a protective factor against bullying [13,14]. Badhwar [15] conceptualized friendship as characterized by "mutual and reciprocal goodwill, trust, respect, affection, and pleasure (…) that to be a friend is, in part, to exercise moral deliberation and virtue". As Giner [16] evinced, friendship is a motor for social change and for the creation of new dreams and realities. Schools and communities moved by such a creative and transformative feeling can become spaces free of violence, where all are welcome and included. The benefits of friendship in human lives are known; for instance, a study with seventh grade students found that relationships based on friendship are the main source of meaning in participating students' lives [17].

Another positive feeling, empathy, is linked with willingness to fight discrimination [18] and has been found to predict defending behaviors in school bullying [19], as well as with the bystander intervention model [20]. Preston and de Waal [21] defined empathy as "any process where the attended perception of the object's state generates a state in the subject that is more applicable to the object's state or situation than to the subject's own prior state or situation" (p. 4). Moreover, Goleman [22] distinguished among three types of empathy as the capacity that allows us to understand what others think, understand what they feel, and understand what they need us to do. Extant literature has focused on the relationship between empathy and bullying, leading to developing several school prevention programs to reduce bullying based on promoting empathy among students [23,24]. Although results have been mixed, some studies do show these types of programs to promote partial positive effects of enhanced empathy related to reduced bullying [25] or increased levels of empathy skills and decreased levels of bullying behaviors [26].

One of the world's biggest longitudinal studies on happiness [27] has determined that quality relationships are what keep people happy throughout their lives most. Positive feelings, such as friendship and empathy, play a crucial role in crafting such quality relationships. Given the influence of quality relationships in human lives, it is of great importance to foster positive feelings that are at the core of such relationships among students from schools, as it will have an impact in creating a supportive, inclusive, and safe environment and, subsequently, in their social sustainability.

Safe and supportive educational environments are best achieved in interactive spaces where, from a whole-school approach, all students, families, school staff, and other community members are involved through egalitarian participation [28]. Schools as Learning Communities, an educational model based on community participation through egalitarian dialogue, has been shown to improve, in addition to academic achievements, the school environment and social cohesion [29–31]. In particular, different studies on these interactive spaces reported an increase in social inclusion [32,33] and solidarity [34] and a decrease in violence [31,35]. Such outcomes are especially prominent in low SES communities, where the context is transformed through the participation and engagement of a diversity of voices, cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences in an egalitarian dialogue [32,36].

1.2. The Impact of Successful Educational Actions in Transforming School Relationships

Successful educational actions (SEAs) implemented in schools as learning communities are at the core of such transformations [37]. SEAs are dialogue-based activities identified by the INCLUD-ED project [38] (INCLUD-ED, the only SSH project from 10 selected among the Framework programmes (European Commission, 2011)) as having great scientific, political and social impact. They have been found to reverse trends of underachievement, reduce

rates of school absenteeism, and overcome social exclusion [37]. Moreover, due to their impact and transferability to diverse contexts, several SEAs have been included in different public policies and policy recommendations, such as the European Toolkit for Schools (https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools/detail.cfm?n=354), or an agreement with the Portuguese Directorate General of Education to implement them in 50 school groupings (https://observador.pt/2019/11/06/projeto-de-combate-ao-insucesso-escolar-chega-a-50-agrupamentos-de-escolas/?fbclid=IwAR1Qs0xSqkZyTgHjKoiLysyrZpa1fKIn-vD3WKOfdIaD0BtY66DmMvYPGZU). Based on the principles of dialogic learning [39], which enhance egalitarian dialogues between different community members involved, SEAs are transforming relationships within and outside the schools, transferring their impact to the communities, neighborhoods, and households of the students and promoting their social sustainability [30,40]. Currently, they are being implemented in more than 6700 schools in 14 countries all over the world.

One of the SEAs is interactive groups (IGs), where students, divided into small, heterogeneous groups, carry out activities in math, science, language, and other subjects with the assistance of an adult volunteer to guide the interactions among them [33,41]. Instead of segregating students on level groups, children from different backgrounds and ethnicities, with different abilities and skills work together in IGs, increasing and diversifying the interactions that students have [42]. Children solve the activities and learn together through the egalitarian dialogue, which implies that they need to provide arguments to support their claims and opinions, rather than justifying them with power positions [43]. They have been found to promote instrumental learning and inclusivity, creating bonds of solidarity and mutual help among students, and contributing to their wellbeing [42,44].

Another SEA is dialogic gatherings (DGs) in which students establish a dialogue around high-quality texts in areas such as literature, science, feminism, mathematics, music, art, or theology, among others [45–48]. In dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs), for instance, students read and discuss classic literature in an egalitarian dialogue, providing more opportunities to those who have participated less to contribute to the discussion, and hence overcome power interactions [49]. Such dialogic space enables participants to share the feelings, ideas, and reflections the classics elicit and to relate them to their own experiences, embodying respect and solidarity towards each other [31,50]. Among other impacts, DLGs contribute to improving students' prosocial behavior [51], to promoting the inclusion of students with learning disabilities [33], and to improving the quality of school coexistence [31]. Moreover, DLGs have recently been reported successful in helping students better deal with the confinement situation they faced during COVID-19 lockdown in Spain [52].

Another SEA is the dialogic model of prevention and resolution of conflicts (DMPRC), which seeks opening up "spaces for dialogue focused on rejecting violence and avoiding attractive violent role models" [53]. This model includes classroom and school assemblies, which often involve students, teachers, and family members in order to make agreements and rules regarding coexistence to be implemented in the school. It also involves other spaces for dialogue created with the aim of fostering spaces of zero violence and rejecting aggressive and violent attitudes [35]. In such dialogic spaces, students practice solidarity under the premise that everyone must help and support the victims while rejecting violent behaviors [54].

In order to ensure quality education for all students, promoting access to education is not enough. Schools need to foster safe and supportive environments within them so that students can develop sustainable lifestyles free of violence, based on the principles of human rights, and enriched by cultural diversity. Propelling quality relationships among students and a positive school environment is fundamental to promote sustainable development beyond the school. The way in which SEAs are contributing to improving school relationships and the environment is widely being studied in a multitude of countries and contexts in which they are being implemented, as evinced in the former paragraphs. However, less is known about the underlying processes leading to such improvements. By looking at a school as a learning community that has shown great improvements in academic achievements and social cohesion, this study aimed to explore whether and how SEAs implemented in

the school generated friendship and empathy, and to analyze the impact of developing such positive feelings in the school's environment.

2. Materials and Methods

This case study has been conducted through the communicative methodology (CM) of research, which aims at co-creating new knowledge and social realities together with research participants [55,56]. It has been approved by the Ethics Board of the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA). All members of the ethics board are scholars with a background and experience in educational research and in research ethics.

2.1. Research Site

Within this communicative framework, a case study [57] has been conducted in order to get a deeper insight on whether and how SEAs implemented in a school as a learning community promotes friendship and empathy, and how these feelings contribute to improving the school's environment. This school, which transformed into a learning community 10 years ago, is located in a municipality at the outskirts of the metropolitan area of a city in Spain, in one of the most deprived neighborhoods. Over 92% of the school's students are from an immigrant background, and more than 95% have a lunch scholarship. In spite of the low socioeconomic status (SES) background of most students, the school has been referred to as the "miracle school" by Catalan, Spanish, and international press due to the high scores achieved in Catalan standardized tests. In fact, students at this school performed higher than the Catalan average in subjects such as Spanish, English, and mathematics, and even higher than some elite schools in the region. In addition, it has received the Education Award of the Circle of Economy Foundation and La Caixa Foundation due to its outstanding results (References to the press news and the award's year have been avoided in order to ensure the school's anonymity). Researchers had previous contact with the school and shared continuous conversations with the staff, especially the principal and the head of studies, about SEAs and the school environment. Hence, after explaining this study's objectives and scope to the staff, they agreed to participate in it.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 18 students and 10 teachers from 1st to 6th grades in primary education. Once the school decided to participate in the study, the principal spoke with each classroom's tutor so that they chose different students from their group to participate in the study. The teachers then randomly selected students from each of their groups according to their availability during the data collection period. After collecting data with the students, the principal told the researcher to go to each classroom and ask teachers—who already knew about the study—who would be willing to participate. Hence, the 10 teachers were randomly selected according to their own availability, while ensuring that there was a representation of most grades and specialist teachers—i.e., DLG teachers, a physical education teacher. Anonymity of all participants has been granted by not displaying any personal data and by changing their names into pseudonyms. The profiles of the participants can be found in Table 1. Informed written consents for children to participate and to be audio-recorded were signed by their parents or guardians. In addition, after explaining the study's objectives and the methods for data collection, students gave verbal consent to participate and to be audio-recorded. Teachers also signed informed written consents to participate and be audio-recorded. Informed written consent forms regarding students were gathered by the school's principal and the head of studies, and those of the teachers were gathered by one of the researchers.

Table 1. Interviewees' pseudonyms and profiles.

	Pseudonym	Grade
Students	Fatima	1st grade
	Lucas	1st grade
	Esther	2nd grade
	Ana	2nd grade
	Yaiza	3rd grade
	Andrea	3rd grade
	Julia	4th grade
	Martin	4th grade
	Yasmin	5th grade
	Amin	5th grade
	Ibtissam	5th grade
	Sara	5th grade
	Isaac	5th grade
	Mohammed	5th grade
	Laura	6th grade
	Estefania	6th grade
	Jose	6th grade
	Aderaman	6th grade
Teachers	Aurora	2nd grade
	Nieves	2nd grade
	Marta	3rd grade
	Joana	3rd grade
	Pau	4th grade
	Carmen	4th grade
	Sandra	5th grade
	Maria	5–6th grades, DLG teacher, and teacher trainer
	Luisa	3–4th grades, DLG teacher, and teacher trainer
	Andreu	physical education teacher

2.3. Data Collection

In order to get a deep insight and understanding of how, if so, SEAs implemented in this school promote friendship and empathy and their impact in the school environment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 students and 10 teachers. Student interviews were conducted towards the end of June 2018 during class time, usually while they were working in IGs or doing exams—once they were done—in groups between two and four. During those three weeks, one of the researchers went to each classroom with the principal in order to take the children to be interviewed to an empty classroom that was usually used for meetings. Once they got to the room, the principal left, and the researcher, whom most of the students already knew, began the interviews with them. Before beginning each interview, they were reminded that they could stop the interview at any point or decide not to answer any question they wanted. Teacher interviews were conducted the last week of June 2018, when there were no students because classes had already finished and the teachers were organizing and gathering the classroom material. The same researcher went to each classroom and asked the teachers whether they were available to conduct the interview at that moment. Teachers were interviewed in the very classrooms in which they were organizing the material in groups between two and four. Following the CM, interviews aimed at gathering participants' reflections and thoughts about different SEAs conducted at the school, the creation or increase of feelings of friendship and empathy among students, and how such feelings were impacting the school environment.

In addition, observations of different SEAs were conducted, namely interactive groups, dialogic literary gatherings, and dialogic pedagogic gatherings for teacher training and classroom assemblies from the Dialogic Model of Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts throughout the whole 2017–2018 school year. Observations were not audio-recorded but notes were taken. In order to complement data from the interviews and observations, two documentary films (The names of the documentary films

have not been displayed in order to ensure the school's anonymity), in which the school appeared as a successful case due to its academic success and its positive environment, were reviewed.

2.4. Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed with the aim of establishing categories among them. After reading through the transcribed data several times, they were first divided into two main categories: how different SEAs propel friendship and empathy, and how developing such feelings contributes to improving the school environment. Then, the first block was divided into two main categories: how SEAs promote friendship and how they promote in empathy. Within the second block, three main categories emerged: how friendship and empathy propel a decrease in conflicts and violent behaviors, how they foster inclusive attitudes, and how they contribute to students' wellbeing and feeling of safety and support.

3. Results

The results from the interviews indicate that participating in SEAs has generally promoted friendship and empathy among students, and that conflicts and violent behaviors have considerably decreased in the school, contributing to students' wellbeing and to a safe and supportive environment. Following the categories established in the previous section, we will now present some of the results obtained from this case study.

3.1. SEAs Generate Friendship and Empathy

The different interviews conducted showed that, according to participants, there has been a significant increase in friendship and empathy among students related to their participation in different SEAs. In this subsection, examples of evidence on such increases are presented.

3.1.1. More and Stronger Friendship

Many students from the interviews stated that participating in SEAs has helped them improve in friendship in, on the one hand, making new friends and, on the other hand, strengthening previous friendships. Working together in small heterogeneous groups instead of individually offers them the possibility to talk more and to a diverse set of people, which helps them make new friends, as a student emphasizes: "[IGs help us have more friends] because we talk more, with more people, and every time we switch groups, and then we make more friends" (Yasmin, 5th grade student). As Yasmin stated, because students switch groups from time to time, they have the opportunity to talk to more classmates, increasing their interactions with them due to the dialogic basis of the IGs. This provides a framework to interact with different people, and by periodically switching groups, they end up talking to people they might not have talked to otherwise, increasing the chances of creating new relationships based on friendship.

However, working and interacting with different people is not the only way through which IGs can generate friendship. As Jose, a 6th grade student explained, "[IGs help us make more friends] because when you don't understand something, they help you do it (…), and if they don't know something, you help them" (Jose, 6th grade student). As Jose explained, helping each other in order to understand and solve the activities together is essential for creating more friendships in IGs. As many interviewees stated, putting students together in small, diverse, and heterogeneous groups enables this mutual relationship of helping and explaining the lesson to one another, breaking hierarchies among them and, hence, making friendship possible.

Yet, not only do SEAs contribute to making new friendships among interviewees, but also to strengthening and enhancing the feeling of friendship already existing among some students. In this sense, the weekly classroom assemblies they hold within the framework of the DMPRC are also among the SEAs highlighted in the interviews as propelling friendship. Overall, students and teachers remarked that such a space strengthens the quality of some students' relationships with each other.

In this sense, one of the students interviewed stated that the assemblies do not help him make new friends, but to make stronger bonds with current ones: "the assembly doesn't make us make more friends, it makes us trust our friends more" (Amin, 5th grade student). Students learn to trust and support each other in this framework of tackling classroom problems and finding solutions through dialogue, and that intensifies the already existing feeling of friendship among some of them.

Lastly, another space where students create stronger bonds are DLGs. In such a dialogic space, students often share experiences, which helps them become closer to one another. One of the teachers explained that "there [in DLGs] they shared many things which then served them to get closer among each other" (Carmen, 4th grade teacher). As the teacher recounted, DLGs foster students to share narratives, experiences, and feelings which help them open up and get closer to each other. By getting to know each other better in DLGs, students can create new friendships, as well as strengthen those they already have.

3.1.2. Propelling Empathy

In addition, all teachers interviewed agreed that SEAs are contributing to propelling empathy among many students. One of the teachers stated that educational actions, such as IGs, foster empathy because they help students get in the skin of others who might have more difficulties and might need their help: "in the IG you are more capable of seeing the difficulties that your classmate has, of becoming aware that he/she needs your help" (Maria, DLG teacher and teacher trainer). IGs provide a framework for students to see classmates' difficulties by working together on the activities. When a student who is more capable in certain tasks is grouped with another one who has more difficulties, the former is more able to see the latter's needs and, hence, his or her empathy might increase.

However, not only do students gain a better understanding of each other's academic difficulties by working together in SEAs, they also get a deeper knowledge of their own struggles and difficulties. As one of the teachers explained, assemblies, for instance, often lead to students sharing struggles or challenges they experience inside and outside the school, which makes some of their classmates empathize with them:

"what I have seen is that [in assemblies] empathy is worked a lot. The first day we did an assembly in my classroom all students ended up crying because one of them explained that he was abandoned, another explained that he had been hit (. . .) and one student, one of them left crying, Ainhoa, she left crying and I said "but Ainhoa, you are fine" and she said "yes, but my father talks to me, takes care of me, loves me, why aren't their fathers like mine?" (Sandra, 5th grade teacher).

As her quote shows, in one assembly, many students opened up to their classmates because they were in a safe space where they knew they could share this kind of experiences. Sharing these accounts in the assembly gave Ainhoa an opportunity to understand others' feelings, as well as to feel their sufferings, becoming more empathetic.

Along this line, some students expressed that thanks to being more aware of others' problems or how they feel through participating in SEAs, they can help them more than they did before. Such is the example of Sara, a 5th grade student who explained the change that assemblies have contributed to becoming more empathetic with classmates, helping them more and taking care of them more than she used to:

"[now that we do assemblies, we help our classmates more] because there are some people about whom we cared very little, but now they matter more to us (. . .) I used to think about my friends, but not as much as I do now" (Sara, 5th grade student).

She recognized that before participating in the assemblies, she did not care much about some of her classmates, but that thanks to participating in them, she is more aware of those classmates and cares more about them. In addition, she stated that since participating in the assemblies she thinks more about her friends.

This way in which some students learn what other students are thinking and feeling is best exemplified in an analogy made by Ibtissam, a 5th grade student: "to me the assembly is like a

classroom that lets feelings fly and classmates take each other's feelings and put them into their hearts to see what they feel" (Ibtissam, 5th grade student). As her quote shows, these dialogic spaces enable many students to exchange each other's feelings, share what they feel, let others take it, and put it inside to better understand it.

3.2. Contribution to a More Supportive and Safer Environment

Importantly, such increases in friendship and empathy have led to improvements in the school environment, in particular, in decreasing conflicts and violent behaviors, in fostering inclusive attitudes, and in promoting wellbeing and a feeling of safety and support among many students. Below, some examples of such evidence are provided.

3.2.1. Decrease in Conflicts and Violent Behaviors

Overall, when talking both to students and teachers, most of them highlighted the great improvements they have witnessed and experienced in the school when it comes to a decrease in conflicts and violent behaviors. Several students and teachers stressed, both in the interviews and in the documentary films, that their friends help and defend them when they most need it. One of them explained in one of the documentary films how her friends always support and defend her when she is attacked by someone else: "for instance if she is insulting me, my friend comes and stands with me, and we leave her alone" (Estefania, 6th grade student). The promotion of friendship and empathy among each other helps many students stand on the side of the victims, protecting and defending them from aggressors, always defending them when they need it.

However, as pointed in the interviews, not only do friendship and empathy influence many bystanders' behaviors, they can also change aggressors' behaviors. Many of them pointed to empathy, for instance realizing they are hurting classmates, as a driver for students with violent or conflict behaviors to stop hurting other students, as one teacher exemplified:

"[SEAs] have allowed them to see their classmates through a different lens. Like when a kid has been constantly saying that he has been suffering, kids who maybe were implicated in this suddenly have opened their eyes and said "hey, we are making a classmate suffer" (Maria, DLG teacher and teacher trainer).

As this teacher's account shows, realizing that some students' actions might be hurting other students makes them reflect on and reconsider what they are doing. This change in perspective might serve as a prevention action for the very students who usually cause conflicts to stop doing so thanks to being more empathetic towards their classmates.

Moreover, interviewees also pointed out the way in which friendship can help prevent some students from acting violently. For instance, Jose explained that his friends help him not to fight or argue with other classmates when he seems to be about to do it:

"sometimes when I'm mad, a friend at school helps me, for instance Mohamed. When I'm mad sometimes, he comes and tells me 'Jose, calm down, don't get mad' (. . .) When for instance sometimes I argue or fight with someone in the playground, [my friends] tell me 'don't fight, don't fight because then the teacher will get mad at you and will punish you', and I say 'ok, I won't fight'" (Jose, 6th grade student).

As Jose highlighted, students with whom he has a friendship relationship help him prevent conflict behaviors. His friends know him and know how to help him not to hurt other students and not to get into trouble. Because they want to help him and care about him, they make him reflect on what he is about to do and recapacitate by showing him the consequences his acts will have. Due to his trust in his friends, he listens to them and decides to do as they suggest, calming down instead of getting into a conflict.

3.2.2. Fostering Inclusive Attitudes

The creation of friendship can also help students with conflict behaviors feel more included in the classroom. Ana, a 2nd grade student, explained the case of one of her classmates and how she started being more included in the classroom when she made more friendships:

"Rkia ended up being very good and had many friends. Because before she only had one friend, the one with whom she misbehaved and did [bad] things (…) and she only played with her, and when that girl didn't come, (…) the poor [Rkia] felt excluded. But now that she has more friends because she has improved, she can play with all of us" (Ana, 2nd grade student).

Ana's account shows that making more relationships based on friendship helped a student who only had one person to play with be more included in the whole group. Whereas when she only had one friend, she was left alone when her friend did not go to school. Once she started making more friends, she started playing with all her classmates, being more included in the classroom.

Moreover, in one of the documentary films we reviewed, different students emphasized that they always take care of each other, that no one is left behind. In one of the interviews to a group of 6th grade students showed in the documentary, in which they were talking about the school relationships and environment, one of the students, Abderraman, and the program's host had the following dialogue:

1. Aderaman: we never leave anyone behind. That is our [school] motto
2. Host: what is your motto?
3. Aderaman: well, I just made that up. I don't know what our motto is, but I think it's that one. We never leave anyone behind (6th grade student) Helping and defending each other and being aware of their challenges and needs contributes to inclusive attitudes in which they do not let anyone behind, because they are all part of this community.

3.2.3. Greater Wellbeing and Feeling of Safety and Support

Many interviewees highlighted that friendship contributes to their wellbeing. Many explained that because they have friends at school, they feel happier because have people to play with and talk to: "[I feel] very happy [at school] (…) because I have friends I can play with and to whom I tell my secrets, and … they support me a lot" (Yasmin, 5th grade student). Yasmin's example shows that she has friends who support her and whom she knows she can trust, in addition to having people with whom to play that make her feel included and happy.

Some students also emphasized feeling more secure and protected thanks to having friends at school. Such is the case of Laura, who stated that she feels protected and safe at school thanks to friendship: "I feel that I have many friends and that makes me feel more protected" (Laura, 6th grade). As her quote shows, she feels that she has many friends at school, which makes her feel protected.

Lastly, a few students stated feeling supported by friendship created in the classroom, as Sara pointed out: "[we consider our classmates friends] because for example if you're sad, somebody supports you and doesn't forget about you" (Sara, 5th grade student). Sara considers her classmates more than that, she considers them to be friends, because whenever she is sad, her friends are always there to support her and note leave her alone.

4. Discussion

As research on school environment and climate shows, learning in a safe and supportive environment free of violence is essential for children's academic success, self-esteem, and wellbeing [2–5]. Developing positive feelings, such as friendship and empathy, is essential for ensuring such spaces in schools and classrooms [8,13,18,19]. In this case study we have looked at a School as a Learning Community, an interactive and whole-school educational model, in order to show whether and how the SEAs implemented there promote friendship and empathy, and their impact in improving the environment. Results from this case study show that SEAs, such as IGs, DLGs, and the DMPRC propel greater empathy and friendship, contributing to decreasing conflict behaviors, increasing inclusive

attitudes, and fostering students' wellbeing and feeling of safety and support. Whereas the replicability of these findings to other schools and contexts remains underexplored, these findings support that friendship and empathy promoted by SEAs conducted at this school as a learning community contribute to improving its school environment.

Previous studies have already shown that schools as learning communities contribute to improving social cohesion and overcoming social exclusion [29,30]. The engagement of the whole community at all levels in an egalitarian dialogue is key in decreasing conflicts and promoting solidarity and social inclusion [31–33,35]. This study's findings are in line with previous ones on other schools as learning communities, as interviewees themselves have pointed out that school coexistence has considerably improved, contributing to a safe and supportive environment. In line with Soler and colleagues' study [31], most participants stated that participating in SEAs such as IGs, DLGs, and the assemblies within the DMPRC has contributed to decreasing conflicts and violent behaviors. However, this study advances evidence on the essential role that developing friendship and empathy through those SEAs has had in promoting such improvements. In addition, although previous studies have shown the impact of SEAs in promoting children's prosocial behavior [51] and solidarity [50], this one focused on how participating in SEAs contributes to promoting children's friendship and empathy.

As some students pointed out in this study, IGs enable them to interact with more classmates, even with those with whom they did not get along, and by interacting with more students than they would if working alone or in pairs, they get to make new friendships. Moreover, because students with different skills, cultural intelligence, and different kinds of knowledge are put together in heterogeneous groups with the aim of helping each other understand and solve the activities through dialogue [33,41], they can see each other's difficulties and help one another to overcome them, fostering their empathy. Hence, by increasing the number and diversity of peer interactions and promoting mutual help, as previous research on IGs has shown [42,44], this SEA contributes to creating new and stronger bonds based on friendship and empathy among some students in this school.

Another SEA that was highlighted throughout the interviews as promoting friendship and empathy is the DMPRC. Most students and teachers valued spaces such as the assemblies, where they discuss issues related to coexistence and how to improve it, very positively. Through an egalitarian dialogue, students share classroom and school issues or conflicts with each other in order to find solutions and prevent future conflicts, always oriented towards supporting the victims [54]. As one of the students pointed out, such dialogic spaces, where they respect each other's opinions and share them knowing that no one is going to be judged, enable students to trust each other more, strengthening the feeling of friendship among some of them. In addition, many students not only talk about classroom or school conflicts in the assemblies, but also about struggles or experiences that occur outside of the school. For some of them, the assemblies are the first space where they hear such experiences from their classmates, becoming more aware of others' sufferings and promoting empathy towards them. Therefore, not only do students practice solidarity through the DMPRC, as Villarejo-Carballido and colleagues [54] reported, but they also practice empathy.

The third SEA that was highlighted by different participants as promoting friendship and empathy among students was DLGs. Research on DLGs has pointed out that the classics contain issues which, when read and shared in an egalitarian dialogue, elicit reflections and feelings that students often relate to their personal experiences [50]. In line with such research, our findings point out that many students open up to their classmates and express feelings, thoughts, and experiences in DLGs. By sharing such accounts, many students in this study increase and strengthen the feeling of friendship by getting closer to each other.

Much of the literature on school conflict and bullying has shown that friendship and empathy play a key role in protecting victims and defending them from students with violent behaviors [13,18,19]. In line with this, our findings also show that such feelings propel supportive and defending behaviors among students. However, the way in which feelings of friendship and empathy prevent students with conflict or violent behaviors from acting violently has received less attention in the literature on

school conflict and bullying. This study brings forward evidence that suggests that raising awareness on the sufferings they are causing some classmates might stop some students from acting in such a hurtful way. In addition, going beyond existing literature in this area, our findings show that friends of students with violent behaviors can prevent them from acting violently.

Lastly, our findings emphasize the role of friendship and empathy in making students feel well, included, supported, and safe. Similar to previous studies, our findings show that participating in SEAs has contributed to inclusive attitudes among many students [42,44]. Yet previous studies did not account the role of positive feelings generated in SEAs as a key in promoting inclusive attitudes. Our findings suggest that, for some students, having relationships based on friendship contributes to making them feel included, supported, and safe. Increasing awareness on what classmates might be feeling or experiencing makes many students develop inclusive attitudes by not leaving anyone behind, and that makes many of them feel supported. Indeed, students in the interviews reported feeling safer and more protected thanks to increased friendships in the school.

Some limitations from this study must be addressed. On the one hand, other feelings such as solidarity have been left out in our analysis. This decision was based on the fact that more studies have been conducted on how schools as learning communities and different SEAs contribute to promoting solidarity in different contexts, whereas no study had focused on feelings of friendship and empathy. Future research should look into other positive feelings, such as, for instance, self-esteem. On the other hand, the development of friendship and empathy and their impact in the school environment as reported in this study are not necessarily generalizable to other schools as learning communities. However, it was never the aim of this study to generalize its findings to all schools as learning communities, but to show the development of friendship and empathy through SEAs and their impact on the school environment in this case study. Bearing in mind the existing evidence on the transferability of SEAs to a great diversity of contexts and their impact in promoting students' solidarity in different schools and contexts, the replicability of these findings in different backgrounds remains underexplored. Future research should study the development of friendship and empathy through SEAs in schools as learning communities with different populations and backgrounds, as well as through different methods and instruments.

Overall, the changes in terms of school conflict and inclusivity evinced in this school as a learning community contribute to creating a more supportive and safer environment. This study has shown the essential pillar that positive feelings, such as friendship and empathy, are in fostering such an environment. However, this study reports that students do not develop friendship and empathy by reading or being lectured about such feelings. Rather, they put them into practice through SEAs that enable the flourishing of such feelings, which build up to more inclusive and less violent attitudes within and outside the school, contributing to sustainable development.

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