

**School-community relationships and *convivencia*.
An ethnographic study of conflict management,
inclusion and participation in two Mexican
primary schools**

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Declaration:

I, **Cristina Perales Franco** confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract:

In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, school relationships –crucial for ensuring the right to education— are framed under the concept of school *convivencia*. This Spanish language term refers to the experiences of living together and learning to live together. In Mexico the need to improve *convivencia* has gone hand in hand with concerns about the need to increase citizen protection and reduce social violence. Educational policies foster the role of schools in this regard, but schools are often perceived as victims of an external harsh context that hinders the possibility of transformation. The ethnographic research here presented is aimed to analyse the relationships between two Mexican schools and their local communities, particularly in terms of families' engagement, and the implications of such relationships for school *convivencia*. Data from participant observations, interviews and surveys was analysed using grounded theory oriented coding and situational analysis. The notion of *convivencia* was theoretically developed using a distinction between restrictive and comprehensive approaches. School practices were examined through an analytical scheme based on explicit and tacit *convivencia* practices, highlighting processes of conflict management, inclusion and participation. The main findings show, firstly, a restrictive understanding of school *convivencia* in both the educational policy and in the schools' explicitly recognized work on *convivencia*, which is based on modifying students' individual wrong behaviour. Secondly, that a wider more comprehensive approach which includes other types of actors and relationships is needed to explain and intervene in school *convivencia*. Finally, four modes –alliance, confrontation, detachment, collaboration- are presented as forms to understand *convivencia* patterns between families and schools. These modes aid to explain how constructions around the “appropriate” family and the “appropriate” involvement –in relation especially to the notion of “dysfunctional families” – shape specific patterns of relationships that contribute to the exclusion of the schools' most vulnerable population.

Dedication:

To Christina Schondube and Ángel Franco —*los abuelos*— who taught me to love stories and respect the people behind them.

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Contents

Abstract:.....	3
Acknowledgements:.....	5
I. Introduction	9
II. School <i>convivencia</i> : experiences of living together and learning to live together in schools	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Notion of <i>Convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. <i>Convivencia</i> and schools	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Understanding and intervening in school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.1 Restrictive approach to school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2 Comprehensive approach to school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. An analytical comprehensive approach to school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.1 Family involvement in the school and its relation to school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5. Conclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
III. Mexico: Country characteristics, educational system and <i>convivencia</i> research.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. A national glance.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Social and crime-related violence in Mexico, Jalisco and Sonora....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Mexican Educational System and Educational Indicators .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. Previous studies on school <i>convivencia</i> and related areas in Mexico	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.1 School violence and discipline research	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.2 School <i>convivencia</i> research	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.3 School <i>convivencia</i> and family participation.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
IV. Research Methodology: An ethnographic approach to school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Ethnography: a method to gain a deep understanding of people's actions and meanings.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Fieldwork process	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1 Selection of the settings.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2 Descriptions of the schools	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3 Fieldwork process and data construction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Analysis post-fieldwork	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. Analytic structure.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
V. School <i>Convivencia</i> Policy in Mexico	Error! Bookmark not defined.

1. Laws that regulate school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.1 Federal level.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2 State Level.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Rules of procedures for schools developed at a state level	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Frameworks of reference for school administration and specifically for school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.1 Federal level.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2 State Level.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. Guidelines for the work of schools' technical councils	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5. Key implications of school <i>convivencia</i> policy in Mexico...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
VI. Explicit Practices of School <i>Convivencia</i> : Preventing conflicts	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Setting and socializing of rules.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.1 <i>Convivencia</i> implications of the rule codes.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Diagnosing aggressive and violent incidents	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1 <i>Convivencia</i> implications of the diagnostic strategies	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. General implications of the practices to prevent conflicts for school <i>convivencia</i> ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
VII. Explicit Practices of School <i>Convivencia</i> : Managing <i>convivencia</i> conflicts	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Reasons for <i>convivencia</i> conflicts	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. First level of conflict management: Reporting, intimidation and physical aggression	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Second level of conflict management: Dialogue, separating conflicting parts and exclusion from school activities	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. Implications of conflict management practices for school <i>convivencia</i> .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
VIII. Tacit Practices of School <i>Convivencia</i> : Dealing with students' needs	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Underachieving in the research's schools.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Reasons for school underachievement.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Institutional strategies to deal with school underachievement	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.1 Detection and report of cases of underachieving students.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2 Setting up and development of institutional spaces of support for underachieving students	Error! Bookmark not defined.

4. Implications of the practices to deal with students' academic underachievement for school <i>convivencia</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
IX. Tacit Practices of School <i>Convivencia</i> : Dealing with school's needs... Error! Bookmark not defined.	
1. Practices to address the school's needs	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.1 Economically contributing to the school	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.2 Assistance in labour tasks to maintain or improve the school ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.3 Participating in parents' committees.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Modes of <i>convivencia</i> at the community level	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1 Alliance.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2 Confrontation.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3 Detachment	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.4 Collaboration.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Implication for school <i>convivencia</i> of the school-families relationships	Error! Bookmark not defined.
X. Conclusions	Error! Bookmark not defined.
References	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendices.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 1. Survey Questions	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 2. Tables of surveys' results.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 3. Interview Instruments	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 4. Fieldwork memos.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 5. Situational map on field.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 6. Analysis situational map	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 7. Analytical memo	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix 8. Table policy documents	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Tables

Table 1. National, municipal and cities' population	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 2. Results from ECOPRED 2015	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 3. Education coverage (% of population)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 4. Completion in 2014-2015 school year (% of population)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 5. Analysis stages.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 6. Analytical elements	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Table 7. References of empirical evidence **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 8. Examples of indiscipline acts **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figures

Figure 1. Map of research settings **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 2. Timeline of peace in Mexico **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3. Map Guadalajara school **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4. Map Ciudad Obregón school..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

I. Introduction ¹

The need for ensuring the right to education has been acknowledged throughout the world. This not only includes guaranteeing schooling coverage and reaching the expected academic outcomes, but also considering the schooling process as a whole. Such a process can be understood as shaped by the network of relationships among school actors that construct schools' everyday life. Quality in education includes, therefore, the relationships that exist in schools and the implications they can have for learning, for the people's well-being and for a social life in common. The experience of living together in schools that these relationships shape — and the learning processes they entail— is called school *convivencia* in Spanish. In different Latin American countries, such as Chile (MINEDUC, 2015), Peru (MINEDU, 2015), Colombia (MINEDUCACION, 2013) and Mexico (Diario Oficial de la Federación [DOF], 2015) — where this research is situated—work on school *convivencia* has become an explicit part of their educational policies. The research presented in this thesis analyses *convivencia* in two Mexican primary schools. It explores in particular the implications of the school-community relationship in such experiences of living together in school and in the characteristics and quality of the schooling process for students and their families, teachers and principals.

Convivencia as an academic and practice field is still emergent, and the concept is present in areas such as school violence, peace, human rights, citizenship, inclusive, intercultural and moral education. Three important rationales are broadly used to justify the emphasis on *convivencia*. First, an improvement in *convivencia* is needed to counteract school violence, which is seen as a worrying issue that hinders quality in education and students' well-being (Ortega Ruiz, 2006; Smith, 2006). Although one cannot claim school violence is a new phenomenon, there is a growing recognition in both the academic literature and public perception of its prevalence in schools, the multiplicity and new forms it can take —being bullying the most acknowledged manifestation of school violence (Bickmore, 2011)— and the negative consequence that violent acts can have in the students' lives (Abramovay, 2006). Secondly, an appropriate *convivencia* is necessary for the fulfilment of the right to education since a positive, safe and inclusive school experience is required to develop learning processes and to reach educational outcomes (Casassus, 2005; OECD, 2013; UNESCO, 2008). Thirdly, a social function of the school is to teach *convivencia* that ought to be democratic,

¹ Given that the content of the thesis is meant for publication, only the introductory chapter will be openly shared in a period following the submission of the thesis.

inclusive and should promote a culture of peace – three aspects that are considered central in the notion of the right to education and educational quality (Fierro Evans, 2013; UNESCO, 2009). In this third rationale, learning to *convivir* in school and for the future is an educational goal in itself. The way these three rationales are connected to each other and the weight given to each of them by the schools' actors, in the educational policy and in the school practices have important implications for the schooling experience.

In Mexico, the construction and practices of school *convivencia* in policy and in schools have gone hand in hand with broader concerns about the need to increase citizen protection and national policies directed at combating crime, in particular organized and drug related crime (see chapter 3). In that sense, the institutional approach to *convivencia* is more focused on protecting students and reducing school violence, which is seen mainly as a behavioural problem of the students that should be addressed through strict rules and sanctions (Zurita Rivera, 2012). Under this construction students' behaviour is understood mostly as originated 'outside' the school, due to the characteristics of their local communities and their families (Valdés Cuervo et al., 2014), a common narrative also found in studies from countries such as France (Debarbieux, 2003), Portugal (Sebastião et al., 2013) and Brazil (Abramovay, 2006). Mexican schools are hence positioned as 'victims' of an external context and teachers and parents often feel that there is little that can be done to foster improvement in both *convivencia* and learning achievements. Previous research in school violence (e.g. Benbenishty and Astor, 2005), peace processes (e.g. Bickmore, 2011) and *convivencia* (e.g. Foutoul Ollivier and Fierro Evans, 2011) show however that although there are important differences depending on the context of the students and the school community for school achievements and processes, schools are not passive receptors. In the same line Sebastião et al. (2013, p. 125) —analysing the school violence policy and implementation in Portugal state— that:

Context counts, [...] but we must look at its impact in both directions, the way it constraints schools activity (Malen and Knapp, 1997; Visser, 2006) and, simultaneously, how schools organize themselves to face those constraints, and in the end, end up contributing to the transformation of the context in which they operate.

The research aimed therefore to analyse —through an ethnographic study in two public primary schools— the relationships performed between schools and their local community, and the implications of such relationships in the schools' *convivencia*. The research was carried out from January 2014 to November 2017 with fieldwork of nine months during 2015.

This study, differently from the majority of the research on *convivencia* done in Latin America (see chapters 2 and 3), is situated in an analytical perspective that does not take as a starting point how school *convivencia* should be but how it is, which means analysing the characteristics and patterns of the relationships among school actors and the implications they have for the experience of living together in schools. It is based on the notion that models of *convivencia* are already present in schools and that there is a need to understand how the experience of living together is constructed and performed in the schools' everyday life, as well as the implications it has for developing peace, democracy and inclusion.

The study's specific aims were to:

- Identify and describe the key relationships between the schools and their local communities.
- Analyse the implications of these relationships for the school experience of the actors (i.e. the students, teachers, principals, parents and other family members).
- Examine the role of educational policy in these school-community relationships.
- Analyse how of the type(s) of *convivencia* link, shape and are shaped by processes of:
 - Participation
 - Inclusion-exclusion
 - Conflict management

An important consideration should be made from the start about the notion of community. The role of the community in relation to school has been considered on the one hand, in the context of decentralization policies that aim, among other things, to spread the burden of resources among different actors to foster government efficiency (Di Gropello, 1999; Shaeffer, 1994) and on the other, as part of democratization processes that foster more horizontal power relationships and social justice (Arnstein, 1969; Freire, 2002; Moll et al., 1992). An increase participation of community actors —parents, NGO's, entrepreneurs, etc.— in schools has usually been advocated and international research has been done in terms on the type and levels of participation, the characteristics of involvement of the different actors, the outcomes of the community-school engagement for schools and for communities, and on the complexities of fostering this involvement (e.g. Bray, 2001; Reimers, 1997). There also has been important critiques regarding the difficulty of defining what a community is (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Cohen, 1989; Hillery, 1955) and establishing the

importance of avoiding a homogenous view of the community that does not recognize the internal differences and power configurations (Bray, 2003).

Understanding the breadth of the term and the diversity in approaches in its study, it is necessary to state that this study approaches community only in terms of its implications for the *relationships in schools*. After an initial exploration of different school-community relationships—in terms of the actors' own identification to particular places, social groups, values, interests and circumstances, and of what they agreed it was shared or not, and among who—I chose to focus on how the community was understood to “come” into the school. For teachers, principals, students and family members the community experienced in school had two constitutive dimensions: firstly, the general socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the schools' immediate context and specially the risks associated with it, and secondly—and more important in the practices and narratives—the community characteristics that the students and the families embodied and “brought” into the schools. This narrowing of the notion of the community allowed me to explore with more detail how family-schools relationships were performed and how community risks were managed. A limitation of this study is however, that it was not able to fully incorporate other actors and narratives that were also tangentially involved in *convivencia* relationships. The main research questions were as follows:

1. What forms of relationship exist between school actors, including parents and other family members in two primary schools in Mexico?
2. How do these relationships shape and how are they shaped by more general patterns of *convivencia* in the schools?
3. What are the implications of the relationships between schools and families for developing peaceful, inclusive and democratic school *convivencia*?

These were explored through the following more specific ones:

- a. What are the relationships between the school and the parents and other family and community actors?
- b. What are the meanings the different actors give to these relationships?
- c. How do school management practices shape these relationships?
- d. How does the educational policy shape these relationships?

- e. How do schools deal with contextual characteristics of the local communities such as family configurations, violence, poverty and marginalization?
- f. How do parents and other community actors participate in the school?
- g. How are school conflicts dealt with and what links are there to the school-local communities' relationships?
- h. What other practices that shape school *convivencia* are related to the way school and local communities interact?
- i. What affective and socio emotional elements are present in these practices?

The study was derived from an initial idea that the way contextual characteristics are understood and managed in schools could have important implications for the possibilities of developing peaceful, inclusive and democratic *convivencia* and that should be explored. This assumption emerged from previous personal work on *convivencia* and school relationships (e.g. Perales Franco et al., 2014; Silas Casillas and Perales Franco, 2014) and other sources initially reviewed (e.g. Fierro Evans et al., 2010; Hirmas and Eroles, 2008; Jares, 2006). Other professional experiences as a secondary teacher and teacher trainer in Mexico also gave me a sense that there was a divide between teachers and families since there does not seem to be a clear view on what the latter's participation should be in schools —more involvement is demanded but teacher autonomy is defended, or schools advocate for collaboration, but teachers are positioned as having to “correct” how parents raise their children. I also perceived that there were difficulties for schools in vulnerable contexts for dealing with structural issues of poverty and social exclusion, which were closely linked to teachers' sense of lack of material, pedagogical and emotional resources. This study also considered as initial grounding points that first, although there might be particular problematic issues that “come” to school there can also be issues derived from or fostered by the schools' processes, practices and cultures. Second, that school violence could be understood more widely than students' behaviour, as a complex and multifactorial phenomena, where economic, social, cultural and political factors come together (Fierro Evans, 2013). These assumptions – framed as well by a personal political standing that expects education to be a mechanism of social justice and argues for a critical view of the inequalities fostered, produced or experienced in schools— worked as inquiry triggers that had to be acknowledged and critically reflected on throughout the thesis since they constituted particular and non-neutral stances from where this research was constructed and is now presented (see chapter 4).

This study addresses, albeit in a limited manner, some important gaps found in previous research on *convivencia*. First, it puts the concept at the core of the research, which is not a common path (see chapter 3) given that *convivencia* is generally addressed either as an emergent element of the research, in direct connection to other topics (e.g. the study of democratic participation) or is seen as a solution to a particular issue. In here *convivencia* as a concept is mapped initially through a scheme of restrictive and comprehensive approaches using Carbajal Padilla's (2013) division as a basis, and its conceptual boundaries and complexities are explored (see chapter 2). Further, I develop an analytical model — constructed through the stated ethnographic approach— which aims to examine school *convivencia* based on exploring the explicit and tacit practices that respond to contextually perceived *convivencia* issues (see chapters 4, 6-9). These practices analyse relationships and processes of conflict management, attention to students' needs and responses to school requirements from a *convivencia* perspective. Secondly, this research contributes to the academic literature on school *convivencia* —and to the notions in Mexican educational policy— by considering not only the students' interactions, but the participation and relationships among the schools' adults (teachers, principals, students' parents and other family members), placing the relationships between schools and their local communities and their implications for school *convivencia* as the research object. Although there is a recognition in the academic field of *convivencia* of the importance of the community level (e.g. Fierro Evans, 2013; Gallardo Vázquez, 2009; Hirmas and Eroles, 2008; Onetto, 2004; UNESCO, 2009), there are hardly any studies of school *convivencia* that address these relationships specifically. The research connects as well to the literature regarding family participation in schools and shows the importance of, on the one hand, considering not only the parent in the school-home relationships, but of including diverse family types and the children's multiple carers. On the other, the study argues for the need to consider the quality of the relationships among the different actors as a central explanatory elements of family involvement in schools.

Three arguments are developed throughout the thesis and represent the research's key findings. First, there is a restrictive understanding of school *convivencia* in both the educational policy and in what the school actors' recognize as explicit work on *convivencia*. It is based on practices for preventing, detecting and modifying students' individual wrong behaviour. This understanding positions school *convivencia* instrumentally as something that needs to be improved to lower school violence and achieve a desired order. Such a construction has implications for how school violence is understood, the way explicitly

recognized practices of school *convivencia* are carried out and the relationships that shape these practices. The second argument is that a wider more comprehensive approach is required to explain –and in some sense intervene in– school *convivencia*. If one considers *convivencia* as shaped by everyday relationships, other practices –such as responses to students’ needs, or family participation in the schools– and other actors’ participation in these practices need to be included. This research shows in this sense how the relational patterns matter for the way school practices are performed.

Finally, through this more complex view of *convivencia* the role of the students’ families is analysed. Evidence is given on how constructions around the “appropriate” family and the “appropriate” involvement –in relation especially to the notion of “dysfunctional families” present in the settings– shape specific patterns of relationships that are related as well to how conflict management, responses to underachievement and participation in dealing with school’s needs occur. Analysing *convivencia* in this way represents a path to investigate how processes of inclusion and exclusion, peace and violence take place through the everyday interactions. The evidence presented here shows the opportunities that actors have to develop positive ways of relating to each other in schools and the cultural, institutional and context elements that hinder them. The focus on *convivencia* is in this sense a way to explore how the right of education is put into practice.

Structure of document

The thesis here presented is organized in 10 chapters. After this introduction (chapter 1) the three first chapters provide details of the theoretical, contextual and methodological standing points. Chapter 2 addresses the concept of *school convivencia*. It provides first a general explanation of the meanings associated with the term and argues for keeping it in its original Spanish. I later move to explain how school *convivencia* is understood in this thesis and how it relates to fields of peace, inclusive, citizenship and human rights education. I then draw on Carbajal Padilla’s (2013) categorisation to distinguish two approaches to understanding and intervening in school *convivencia*: a restrictive approach – that mainly positions *convivencia* as an instrumental aspect to prevent, reduce or eliminate school violence–, and a comprehensive approach – that positions inclusive, democratic and peaceful *convivencia* as an educational goal in itself and as part of quality in education. I finally address how my personal analytical stance is constructed and include specifically some elements used to examine parental and family participation in school.

Chapter 3 introduces a description of the Mexican context and some of its most important social challenges. It highlights the social conflict that has occurred in the last decade which has seen an increase in armed and drug related violence, and in general perceptions and expressions of social violence. I then describe how Mexico's educational system —particular the primary level— is organized and some of its main characteristics, including its most important educational reforms. Finally, I assess how school *convivencia* has been researched in this country and some of the gaps in the literature this study attempts to address. Chapter 4 explains the methodological path carried out to construct the research. I present first the reasons for choosing an ethnographic approach, then I explain the selection process and provide a description of the research's two schools. In the rest of the chapter I describe the fieldwork and analysis process, highlighting some of the key methodological and ethical decisions made.

A deeper examination of the educational policy of school *convivencia* in Mexico is then presented in Chapter 5. It explores both federal and state policies first, and then other more practical guidelines for the school work that include elements related to school *convivencia*. These documents make visible the importance that this area is given, but also the particular constructions they present. Although schools do not automatically implement their regulations, they represent important —and not always congruent— frameworks that shape schools' actors practices and understandings.

The next four chapters are the core of the thesis. They develop the analytic scheme used to explore, understand and provide an explanation of the multiple patterns of *convivencia* found in these schools. Each of them takes on particular sets of practices that include community-school relationships that shape school *convivencia*. The first two of them, chapters 6 and 7, address practices that are explicitly recognized by the school actors as work on *convivencia*, which are basically those that deal with what the actors consider *convivencia* conflicts. Although the practices in these two chapters are often performed together to prevent, stop and modify students' wrong behaviour, an analytic distinction was made to highlight their main aim in the school settings. Chapter 6 presents two sets of practices to *prevent convivencia* conflicts: setting and socializing of the rules and diagnosing aggressive and violent incidents. Chapter 7 explains the practices carried out to *manage* conflict. These are divided into two levels; the first one includes practices of reporting to the adults, intimidation and physical aggression, and the second one, practices of dialogue, separating conflicting parts and exclusion from school activities. This chapter also includes the reasons the school's actors associate with *convivencia* conflicts, in here narratives about families and

context become important symbolic elements that give meaning and shape the managing of conflict practices.

Chapter 8 and 9 examine practices that are not recognized as work on *convivencia*, but are nevertheless crucial to understand the patterns that school *convivencia* takes. They explore interactions where families are key participants and, as it will be argued, have strong ties with explicit *convivencia* practices. Chapter 8 presents an analysis of practices to respond to student needs, particularly students' underachievement. It explores the narratives associated with its causes and analyses from a *convivencia* perspective two set of institutional strategies: a) detection and reporting of underachieving students and b) setting up and development of institutional spaces of support. In Chapter 9 practices developed to respond to the schools' maintenance and improvement requirements are first presented. These are important because they are the ones where families are expected to take a leading role. Through the analysis of the different types of participations four *convivencia* modes between the families and the school are proposed: alliance, confrontation, detachment and collaboration. Interestingly, these modes do not only address participation in school's needs, but they also differentiate between the patterns of relationship in the practices of preventing and managing conflict and of responding to students' needs.

The scheme presented in chapters 6-9 is derived from the analysis of the empirical data –as chapter 4 explains. Each chapter starts with an ethnographic style of description, which is followed by a discussion that establishes links with the theoretical framework and addresses especially their implications for school *convivencia* in terms of inclusion, affectivity and participation, as well as peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding processes. The thesis ends with chapter 10, where a conclusion is drawn that describes the main elements presented in this thesis and highlights the research's contribution in contextual, methodological and theoretical terms. In this conclusion, possible links between the findings of this study and other contexts are drawn, including how an approach of *convivencia* might relate to broader issues of school conflict, participation, diversity, inclusion, and human rights. Finally, I explore in more depth the limitations of the study and finish by stating possible lines for further research.

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