Good Training is Not Enough:
Research on Peer Mediation Program Implementation

© Kathy Bickmore, August 2001
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada
kbickmore@oise.utoronto.ca

Abstract
This research examines an initiative of the Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cleveland, Ohio, USA.   The CCR program, typical of many 'cadre' school mediation projects around the world, involved intensive training and follow-up support for teams of peer mediators and adult advisors at several urban elementary schools. Qualitative and quantitative data , analyzed in light of scholarly literature, indicate that such programs can significantly improve the average 8-11 year old students' (not only the mediators') understanding of and inclination to use nonviolent conflict resolution, and also their engagement and capacity to achieve in school. To develop equitable, effective, and sustainable programs required specific commitments from administrators and other school staff, which are outlined in the paper.

Young students can learn to help each other resolve interpersonal conflicts in school. This paper reports research on one exemplary conflict resolution education program, the Elementary School Initiative of the Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in the Cleveland Municipal School District in Ohio, USA, 1997-99. The study examined peer mediation's role in (and effect on) the social environment in several inner-city elementary schools, and found that it had positive effects.

Conflict —disagreements and problems resulting from divergent wishes or needs— is inevitable in human life, and can be a positive force for learning and development. The goal of conflict resolution education is to reduce the disruption and harm that can arise when conflicts are mismanaged, by helping students and educators to develop skills and inclinations that support constructive nonviolent conflict resolution. *Mediation* is one process for facilitating conflict resolution: an unbiased third party (mediator) helps disputants to talk about and handle their problems. Mediation is a voluntary procedure in which individuals seek assistance, but retain control of the solutions: mediators do not judge or counsel. School-based *peer mediation* is student-facilitated dispute resolution.

The simplified process used in CCR's peer mediation is similar to that used in school

programs throughout much of the world (Cameron & Dupuis 1991, Hall 1999):

- Establish each participant's independent consent to participate and to keep the proceedings confidential.
- Each participant tells her/his own view of the problem.
- Mediator assists the participants to communicate together to understand the solvable parts of their problem.
- Mediator guides participants to generate and describe possible solutions, and to negotiate a resolution that they both/all can accept.
- Affirmation and closure.

At the elementary school level, mediation sessions are typically short, informal discussions, conducted near where the original dispute occurred and ending with verbal agreements.

Most school-based mediation programs, including Cleveland's, use a 'cadre' approach to peer mediation: a small group of students in each school are trained, outside of regular classes, to provide the mediation service. Less frequently, some programs train whole classes, grades, or school populations to handle conflict and to take turns acting as mediators. The student mediators in a cadre program typically meet and work together as a peer leadership team with an adult advisor, to deepen their own skills and to promote the use of nonviolent conflict resolution in their school communities. This extra-curricular youth leadership approach to peer mediation has spread widely, because such programs involve low cost and require minimal organizational change, yet participants believe they make a difference.

Previous Research

Until recently, little systematic research was available regarding the implementation or effectiveness of conflict resolution programs, including peer mediation, in schools. However, practitioners' interest and commitment to peer mediation has fueled the rapid spread of these innovations in schools across much of the world (CREnet 2000, Hall 1999).

Where there are sufficient mediators on duty, peer mediation programs are associated with reduction in physical aggression (Cunningham et.al. 1998). Peer mediation supports student learning of skills for problem-solving, decision-making, communication, critical thinking, and and self-discipline (Crary 1992, Johnson & Johnson 1996), and may result in reduction in disciplinary actions (Carter 1995, Stomfay-Stitz 1994). Where mediator teams are diverse and bias is addressed, students may also develop intercultural sensitivity (Day-Vines et. al. 1996). Peer mediation programs, by offering alternative autonomous approaches to self discipline and by involving a wider population of facilitators to assist students' conflict management, can help to overcome some of the equity problems common in traditional punishment-based discipline (Bettman & Moore 1994, Slee 1995). The vast majority of student conflicts that go to peer mediation are resolved (85-95%), and nearly all of those agreements are kept (MAMP 1995).

A systematic independent analysis of peer mediation in a range of schools compared peer mediation cadre programs, to peer mediation programs that trained more students and infused conflict resolution lessons in classroom curriculum, to comparison schools that had no conflict resolution programs (Jones et. al. 1998). They found that both kinds of peer mediation programs significantly benefited students and schools by improving social conflict behavior.

The greatest impact of the programs was on the students who were trained directly and given opportunities to practice mediating, but entire student populations also benefited. The present study of the CCR Elementary School Initiative was designed to reinforce these results, and to extend our understanding of the consequences of specific program interpretation and implementation practices in urban elementary schools.

Systematic observations of playground behaviour showed that while male and female mediators were equally likely to notice and respond to conflicts involving males (which tend to be more overt and easily visible), female mediators were significantly more skilled at spotting and responding to the (often quieter) conflicts involving females (Cunningham et.al. 1998). Although the assessment instruments may be gender-biased (Bergsgaard 1997), other researchers have shown no significant gender differences in program effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson 1996, Jones et. al. 1998).

The student mediators themselves have the most sustained opportunities to practice the roles and skills associated with nonviolent problem-solving. Thus, the selection and support of the students who will receive this learning opportunity is an important consideration. Strong peer mediators are not necessarily 'good' students. Because mediation involves persuasion (to choose a nonviolent option) and leadership (to facilitate the negotiation process when participants are upset), mediators must be influential among their peers to be effective. Teams of peer mediators that include students of diverse academic abilities, genders, and cultural groups tend to be stronger, more sustainable, and more effective than homogeneous teams (Day-Vines 1996). Students who previously had been aggressive or disruptive frequently become particularly effective peer mediators (Cunningham et.al. 1998, Lupton-Smith et.al. 1996). Where some children are excluded from peer mediation teams because of academic weakenesses or non-compliant behaviour, those students are denied benefits and programs are less effective.

Program Context:

The Cleveland, Ohio school district is fairly typical of large urban districts in the northern United States. Its 1997-98 enrolment (76,000) was approximately 70% African-American, 20% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic/Latino, and several other ethnic and language groups. The median income of students' families was about 22% lower than the state's average. The graduation rate was about 42%, half the state's average (Ohio Department of Education, spring 1998). Many Cleveland school buildings were in serious disrepair: stress was evident across the system.

The Cleveland Municipal School District Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) was formed in 1995, from the successful training arm of the district's Winning Against Violent Environments mediation program. The CCR program uses the same basic model as most school-based peer mediation programs, with one important exception: the trainers are not professional teachers, but diverse urban youth enrolled or recently graduated from that school system. In the research program, a team of 25 - 30 elementary students and one or two adult advisors from each of 28 project schools received program development assistance and an intensive three-day peer mediation training led by CCR. Peer mediators were children, grade 3-5, whose social leadership potential had been exhibited in negative and/or positive ways, and

who were representative of the school's entire racial, cultural, and gender populations. Adult Conflict Management Program Advisors met with mediators regularly to practice skills and co-plan activities, facilitated referrals to mediation, and coordinated their school programs. The program emphasized the implementation of peer mediation in each school and the engagement of the youth as leaders in spreading nonviolent conflict management throughout their schools.

The same basic program was given to a range of elementary schools in this city district. CCR provided training, guidelines, resources, and professional development for implementing peer mediation programs. Because authority was delegated to the program advisors and mediator teams to interpret and implement the program, the programs took different forms in the various elementary schools.

Research Method:

The study focused on the development, institutionalization, and consequences of mediation programs for whole elementary schools, and in particular for diverse 8-11 year old students, over two academic years. Qualitative evidence, from 28 project schools, includes observations and interviews with administrators, program advisors, other teachers, peer mediators, and other students at each school at the end of each year, supplemented by interviews and meetings with program trainers and advisors throughout 1997-99. Quantitative evidence, from 18 project schools, includes a survey regarding conflict management understanding and attitudes, completed by all grade 3-5 students in each school before and after one year of program implementation. Changes in disciplinary suspension rates and achievement test results were also assessed.

Results:

The Center for Conflict Resolution's elementary conflict management program showed positive results after one year of implementation. Many or most grade 3-5 students in nearly all project schools (orally assessed in their classrooms at the end of the project year) showed significant familiarity with the purpose and process of peer mediation. In a few schools, many younger students also were well-informed about mediation. Over 70% of the grade 3-5 students said on surveys that they would like to be peer mediators, which indicates program prestige. Post-test scores on the Student Attitudes About Conflict (SAAC) survey, in schools that implemented the program, were significantly higher than pre-test scores on the survey taken as a whole (average +0.09 points on a 5-point scale) and on three thematic sub-scales. Students' average understanding and inclination toward nonviolent conflict resolution increased significantly (+0.10), as did their assessments of their own capacities to handle conflicts in interactions with peers (+ 0.08). This indicates that peer mediation was associatedwith improvements in grade 3-5 students' understandings, feelings of efficacy, and willingness to nonviolently handle conflict. Students' attitudes toward attending and participating in school also improved significantly (+ 0.11), apparently due to the implementation of peer mediation. Although the pre-post difference was positive (+0.06), one year of program implementation was insufficient to significantly improve the average student's perception of school climate. Schools that more thoroughly institutionalized mediation (as indicated by qualitative data) had stronger school climate results than other project schools, so full implementation of CCR peer

mediation programs may indeed improve school climates.

Pass rates on the grade 4 Ohio Proficiency Tests of citizenship and reading achievement increased in CCR project schools considerably more than the district average. This suggests that CCR's peer mediation program is associated with increases in students' academically-relevant skills and their comfort in school — perhaps because it helps them to resolve personal problems so they can focus on learning. Students' time out of class to practice conflict resolution can be an academic advantage, not a disadvantage. Grade 3s' and grade 5s' over-all SAAC score increases were considerably stronger than grade 4s'. This is because many grade 4 students in Cleveland were denied opportunities to participate in this program by teachers or principals, on the mistaken assumption that such activity would be detrimental to these Ohio Proficiency Test results. In schools where grade 4 students were allowed to participate as actively as other students, their results were equivalent to other grades.

Average SAAC scores, especially in peer relations, were considerably more improved for boys than for girls. Girls' pre-test SAAC scores were significantly higher than boys', and showed little improvement during the project. Peer mediation apparently helped the average boy to 'catch up' to the average girl in their attitudes and understandings for managing conflict. The high variations among individual students' perceptions of school climate suggest that peer mediation may be insufficient to adequately reduce the incidence of social exclusion or bullying (problems that disproportionately hurt a few lower-status students).

Punishment for violent behaviour (suspensions) were considerably reduced in CCR project schools. While Cleveland's over-all elementary school suspension rate went up about 2%, suspension rates in the main CCR project schools went down an average of 25%. Peer mediation can provide a meaningful alternative to suspension, by resolving problems (rather than simply postponing or punishing) and by helping children prone to fighting to learn alternative ways of handling their conflicts.

The individual schools' varied interpretations of the peer mediation program made an immense difference in the character, effectiveness, and sustainability of their conflict management initiatives. Not every school successfully implemented peer mediation. In one or two project schools, essentially no peer mediation took place, beyond the training and a few poorly-attended meetings. In another eight schools, the program did not develop much in the second year, which suggests a sustainability problem. Program advisors were essential links to the professional teaching staff, in clarifying and enhancing links between mediation, discipline, and academic work. Administrator and staff support —notably, openness to trying the program and allocating regular periods for mediators to meet— was also crucial to program success.

School staff reported improvements in self-discipline, attitude toward school, and communication skills, particularly among those they had considered to be less successful or troublesome students. Some schools were far more successful than others in keeping diverse students — especially those originally seen as 'negative leaders' and those with limited English — as active and confident members of the conflict management program. The most important factor was the commitment and capacity of the program advisors to coach and encourage the whole range of students, and regular/ frequent mediator meetings.

In practice, mediation sessions were rarely absolutely confidential in these elementary

school contexts. When program advisors in some schools insisted on being present or involved during students' mediation sessions, program development was limited by the advisor's scarce time and by some students' distrust of adults. Occasionally adult monitoring seriously violated students' confidentiality and stifled their interest in using the mediation option. However, some reliable adult support was also essential, particularly for keeping mediators with weaker skills, academic achievement, or peer popularity in the program. Too little adult involvement risked putting mediators or their clients in dangerous situations, while too much (or excessively directive) adult involvement impeded students from participating in a truly alternative form of dispute resolution.

Student mediators sometimes unconsciously imitated traditional patterns of discipline that contradicted the principles of peer mediation. In about a third of the project sites, to varying degrees, a few mediators were telling other children how to behave and assigning blame (counseling and monitoring), rather than empowering their peers to autonomously generate resolutions to their own problems (mediating). However, wherever they were given sufficient support, respect, and opportunities to show what they could do, most of these 8-11-year-old mediators exceeded the expectations of those around them. The enthusiastic testimonials from formerly-skeptical teachers, administrators, peers, and parents indicate that young children can indeed help to build peaceful environments. The longer and more widely a program developed in a school and the more diverse the mediator team, the more student understandings and school climate improved.

Conclusion:

The results of this research project affirm that peer mediation, following a program model like CCR's, can improve elementary students' capacity and inclination to handle conflict nonviolently, their relationships with peers, and their attachment to school. Furthermore, such programs can reduce suspensions from school for violent activity and increase academic engagement and achievement. At the same time, good training is not enough: school-based program development, and support to build equitable programs that can grow and last over time, requires strengthened commitment and clarity of purpose.

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