High School Students' Perceptions of Their Proficiency with Conflict Resolution after

Participation in Peer Mediation Training

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to build the researcher's understanding of the effect of peer mediation programs by examining the effectiveness of such programs to determine whether providing students with the tools for peer mediation and conflict resolution would improve their self-perceptions of their own abilities regarding conflict resolution. The participants chosen for the study were 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students who were recommended by their teachers or by the school's administration. The measurement tool used was a survey created by the researcher and designed to determine students' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the peer mediation process and conflict resolution abilities once they had completed the peer mediation training. This qualitative study extended from February 2013, when the students were selected, to March 2013 when the training was completed. The participants reported much improvement in their knowledge of the peer mediation process as well as their understanding of the underlying causes of conflict amongst their peers and various methods to reduce or improve these conflicts.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The education system in our country relies on social interactions between many different parties: teachers, administrators, parents, the school's community and, of course, students. School is the first setting in which many students are required to interact with those outside of their families. In order to be successful in school, students must engage in positive interactions with their peers, teachers, and administrators. Many of the problems that occur in schools can be traced back to negative interactions, specifically those between individual students and their peers or between various peer groups (Burross, 2008). It is therefore crucial that every school work to ensure that students engage in positive relationships with their peers.

Many of the problems between students and their peers are caused by factors outside of the school setting, and educators may believe that these issues cannot be addressed within the school. However, many of these problems *can* be addressed within the school setting through the use of a variety of interventions and strategies that vary from school-wide initiatives to individual counseling (Burross, 2008). According to Burross, by addressing negative student - peer interactions, a school can become a safer place for students to learn both socially and academically.

This researcher first became interested in addressing the problems students encounter when interacting with their peers in the school setting in her role as a teacher at Kenwood High School. She, along with her administrators, observed that students tended to have recurring conflicts with one another and wished to learn of a way to resolve these conflicts so that they do not disrupt the students' learning.

Statement of Problem

Many schools do not have the time or necessary resources to address problems between and among students on an individual basis; school generally is not considered the place for individual counseling and therefore many negative student-peer interactions are allowed to fester until they become dangerous situations that may lead to bullying. Many schools have chosen to implement a peer mediation program within their school day to address these concerns. These programs differ in intensity, but basically all require the training of student mediators who then work with pairs or groups of students to alleviate problematic interactions. There is a scarcity of data regarding the implementation and efficacy of these programs. Therefore, this study serves as a first step toward studying the effectiveness of such programs. The goal of the study is to determine whether providing students with the tools for peer mediation and conflict resolution will improve their self-perceptions of their own abilities regarding conflict resolution.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of students who are provided peer mediation training regarding their ability to resolve personal and peer conflicts successfully?

Operational Definitions

Peer mediation is a program in which students are trained to work with pairs or groups of students to resolve specific or general conflicts (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). The implementation of peer mediation is a lengthy process that begins with the identification of students who could be effective peer mediators. These students then engage in a training process which helps them to identify underlying conflicts and work with their peers to resolve these conflicts. The actual process of peer mediation involves six basic steps: the conflicting students' willingness to engage in the mediation, the gathering of the students' points of view, focusing on

the interests of each disputant, creating a win-win option through the use of brainstorming

activities that involve the mediators and the disputants, the evaluation of these win-win options

by all of the parties involved, and the creation of an agreement between the disputants. The

focus of this study is the identification and training of potential peer mediators.

Peer mediators, for purposes of this study, are defined as students in tenth through

twelfth grade who have been identified by their teachers and the administration as following the

school's virtues of acceptance, excellence, and respect. These students then engage in *peer*

mediation training.

Peer mediation training for purposes of this study, is a five-week process in which peer

mediators are trained in the definition of conflict, regular student responses to conflict, the

origins of conflict, understanding peace-making, as well as the six steps of peer mediation.

Through this training, students examine their own beliefs about conflict and attempt to use these

beliefs to understand how various conflicts can be resolved. This training involves the use of

many hypothetical situations and role-play activities that can serve to defuse and reduce conflict

among students.

Conflict in this study is defined as any verbal or physical argument between students that

causes issues for the students in school. Thus, peer mediators who engage in peer mediation

training should be equipped at the end of the training with the necessary tools to help alleviate

conflict amongst their peers.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review discusses student peer relationships and examines strategies for building positive peer relationships among students in high school. The first section of this literature review explains the importance and relevance of positive peer relationships among students. In the second section, positive peer relationships among students are described, as well as the effect of these relationships on student motivation in high school. In the final section, several strategies for improving student peer relationships are described.

The Importance of Positive Peer Relationships

Human beings are social creatures with a "pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Chen, 2009, p. 20). For many students, school is the main venue for interaction with those outside of their families. These interactions can be positive or negative, depending on the atmosphere in which they occur and the personalities of those involved. It is in high school that students begin to use others as models of behaviors, for better or for worse, and that peers become the main social authority (Burross, 2008).

Students should be encouraged to engage with their peers in a positive fashion during high school for several reasons. First, it is during adolescence that students are entering Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion (Burross, 2008). During this time, students are beginning to identify themselves and a large part of this identification comes from their interactions with their peers, as they begin to distance themselves from their parents (Jager, 2011). Since it is rare for adolescents to have high-quality relationships in every relational

domain, it is important that they be provided with the potential to build positive relationships with their fellow students.

Students who have positive relationships with their peers have several advantages over those who do not have such relationships and especially over those who engage in highly negative relationships; these advantages include higher levels of motivation and achievement, as well as better school attendance (Burros, 2008). For many students, school is a place to socialize with peers, and students who get along well with their peers are likely to enjoy school and thus may be motivated to attend regularly (Cox, Duncheon, & McDavid, 2009). These students are more likely to achieve in school because they may be better able to focus their attention as they are undistracted by regular conflicts and because they feel they have a supportive network of friends. Students who have fulfilled their need for approval, belonging, and love, as defined by Maslow, are better able to focus on higher level needs such as self-actualization (Burros, 2008). As Cox et al. (2009) note, "when students feel connected to and supported by others, their motivation could be maximized because their fundamental need for relatedness was being satisfied" (p. 1). Conversely, students who feel ostracized by their peers may avoid school or participation in classroom activities, thus achieving far below their ability (Burros, 2008). Therefore, a school must take care that students are provided with the opportunity to engage in positive relationships with their peers help ensure that the students are present, motivated, and undistracted by negative relationships with their peers.

<div align="center">**What are Positive Peer Relationships?**</div>

A positive peer relationship is one in which two peers engage with one another and are generous and helpful toward each other (Chen, 2009). When conflicts arise within positive peer relationships, these friends are more likely to make efforts to resolve the argument and restore

the relationship . Positive peer relationships also require a certain level of effective communication (Gomez & Ang, 2007) and attachment on the part of those involved; these attachments are related to one's well-being and are thus crucial for adolescents, as their peers begin to replace their parents as models for interaction with the world around them (Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque, & Johnson, 2012). These positive peer relationships thus provide the student with a sense of belonging in the school by encouraging such attachments.

Positive peer relationships also tend to emphasize the importance of a student's achievement in school. Positive peer relationships motivate students to attend school, as well as to achieve in their classes (Burross, 2008). Gomez and Ang (2007), note that "students' perceptions of being cared about and valued in the school play a major role in promoting school connectedness, a key protective factor in adolescent development, and reducing problem behaviors" (p. 99). As suggested by Moore, Young, Weir and Ochshorn (2007), strong social relationships are related to high self-efficacy, which impacts academic achievement and future career success. In other words, students who have strong social relationships have built a foundation upon which they can base their future academic and career success. These open, honest, positive relationships that are built on a strong basis of attachment and open communication thus encourage students to succeed in school.

All of the relationships in which students engage with their peers are not positive; in fact, one might argue that students frequently engage in negative interactions with their peers. These negative interactions can have a deleterious effect on a student's scholastic achievement. As noted by Creasey and Ladd (2004), "serious conflict management problems in late adolescent relationships may undermine psychological and academic functioning" (p. 236). A student who feels bullied or ridiculed by his or her classmates will be less likely to achieve academically and

may display unacceptable classroom and social behaviors. In other words, a student who fails to attach to friends in a positive manner may experience low self-esteem and emotional well-being. Thus, the student may be less well-adjusted than his or her peers who have more secure attachments or positive peer relationships (Caron et al., 2012).

One major issue for students who do not engage in positive peer relationships is social anxiety. Social anxiety is the feeling of fear, anxious anticipation, and distress associated with social situations (Tillfors, Persson, Willen & Burk., 2012). Students who feel social anxiety are less likely than their peers to participate in classroom learning. Additionally, students who experience social anxiety tend to have fewer positive experiences in the peer context and tend to report fewer friendships, lower levels of peer acceptance, and higher levels of peer victimization, which can lead to decreased school attendance and less classroom participation. If a student views the classroom environment as threatening, he or she may begin to engage in self-protective behaviors, such as withdrawal from the learning community, which could decrease scholastic achievement. Therefore, it is important that students be provided with a warm, open environment in which they can learn and that they be afforded the opportunity to engage in positive relationships with their peers, thus reducing withdrawal tendencies. By reducing students' levels of social anxiety through promoting their positive interactions with peers, the school community can motivate students to attend school regularly and strive for scholastic achievement.

Strategies for Promoting Positive Peer Relationships

There are several strategies or interventions a school can choose to promote positive peer relationships or mend extant negative peer relationships. These strategies range from holistic programs to individual interventions for students. An example of a holistic program for at-risk

teens and their parents is a program called "Creating a Responsible Thinker" (Moore et al., 2007, p. 129). This program focuses on the "family's critical role in facilitating developmental outcomes" (p. 129). It is important to note that to implement this program, a student's parent must be available to the school. This program has two guiding principles: the responsibility of well-being rests upon the client or student and the importance of maintaining health and balance in all domains of life. Moore et al. explain that the program focuses on five realms: spiritual, physical, sexual, emotional, and cognitive, and the importance of integrating these realms for a complete life. This program involves one and a half hour weekly sessions for six consecutive weeks, in which parents and teens attend separate sessions containing parallel content and taught by a trained counselor. These sessions focus on providing parents and teens with alternative methods for creating healthy, dynamic lives based on proactive, as opposed to reactive, thinking. Moore et al. explain that the six sessions run in a specific order. The first session is Introduction to Life Puzzle-Making, which focuses on building group cohesion and introducing the underlying concepts of the program. The next session is The Choosing Continuum, which focuses on being able to incorporate proactive language into their daily lives. Building the Edges and Creating the Self is the third session and it emphasizes the differences between people and the need to respect others. The fourth session, The Feeling/Thinking Flow, explores the impact a persona's thinking has on his or her ability to make proactive choices. The Crazy 8 Demolition Party is the fifth session and discusses maintaining sanity while working within the larger community. The final session, called Drive Your CART, brings the parental and student groups together to discuss what they have learned. Overall, this program can be very successful. However, it is important to note that the main focus of this intervention is on student-family relationships. Moore et al. state, "problems in family functioning often precede the initiation of

adolescent problems" (p. 141). This program appears to be most appropriate for at-risk students who already may be headed towards involvement with drugs or crime, rather than for students who simply are having trouble engaging, or interacting, with their peers.

Another holistic program involves promoting positive youth development (PYD) in schools. This program assists adolescents in developing multiple areas of competence, personal confidence, social connections, personal character, and the ability to care and contribute to society (Gomez & Ang, 2007). The creators of this program believe that schools "have the ability to provide positive people, positive places, and positive opportunities that promote positive development and act as protective factors" (Gomez & Ang, 2007, p. 98). The first element of this program relies on having positive adults in a school. Positive adults, as defined by Gomez and Ang, are "those who recognize and respond to adolescents' need for ongoing support in their development and their need for connectedness to others" (p. 98). Gomez and Ang explain that this support can be provided by an adult who is accessible, available, and supportive, but firm enough to set high expectations for the students in question. Further, they state that teachers usually provide a positive adult presence in the classroom by recognizing pro-social behavior, providing concrete feedback, praising students, and being sensitive to signs of difficulty. Outside of their regular duties, positive teachers also provide listening support, emotional support and personal assistance to students. The second element of this program is the creation of positive places and environments in the school. Gomez and Ang explain that the first aspect of this element is the need for healthy school boundaries wherein students understand social expectations and obligations and feel a trust in those who work in and attend their school. These school boundaries must provide for age-appropriate levels of autonomy, such as allowing high school students a say in the governance of their school. The second aspect of creating

positive places and environments in the school is to ensure a safe and caring climate. According to Gomez and Ang, students must feel safe and free from bullying in school, as "students' perceptions of being cared about and valued in the school play a major role in promoting school connectedness" and reducing problem behaviors (p. 99). The next element of this program relies on the creation of positive opportunities for students in the school. Gomez and Ang believe that these positive opportunities should help a student develop competence, confidence, connections with others, character, caring, and contribution to society, and that these opportunities should occur both within the standard curriculum and during extra-curricular activities. Further, the authors state that these opportunities should aid students in developing their ability to understand and express the emotional and social aspects of their lives. Some social competences upon which schools can focus include making positive choices, avoiding negative influences, managing feelings, building positive friendships, being sensitive to others, and managing conflict. Gomez and Ang state that the program requires a system-wide change and participation from community institutions. Further, they explain that prior to implementing a PYD program, a school must create a well considered plan of action to ensure collaboration between parents, teachers, school leadership, school district leaders, and other key stakeholders. Finally, Gomez and Ang reflect that implementation of a PYD program also requires the physical and financial resources to maintain it, which must be supported by "a stable source of funding" (p. 101). Therefore, this type of strategy can-be implemented only by an entire school, and must have both the financial and emotional backing of the entire community. Without this level of support, the strategy is doomed to fail.

Another strategy a school can implement which while not a holistic strategy, does require the participation of the entire school, is the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, or

PBIS, program (Carter & Pool, 2012). This program focuses on supporting pro-social behaviors

and preventing challenging behaviors. Implementing PBIS can be very time-consuming and

difficult process as it not only involves the buy-in and participation of teachers, administrators,

and school support personnel, but also that of the students. PBIS requires that schools

"restructure their discipline systems to provide universal, targeted, and intensive levels of

supports to encourage positive social, emotional, and behavioral growth in all students"

(Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012, p. 219). This process involves clearly defining classroom and non-

classroom (such as the cafeteria and library) area expectations, directly teaching these

expectations and behaviors, determining and defining effective consequences, implementing

these consequences, and applying a collaborative problem solving-model. Explicit teaching of

appropriate behaviors and expectations is a crucial element of this program. Without such

explicit teaching, students do not know what they are expected to do or how they should behave,

or what the consequences of misbehavior might be. When designed and implemented

collaboratively within a school, PBIS has been found to reduce office disciplinary referrals, as

well as detentions and suspensions. It is important to note that financial support is required for

PBIS to work effectively, as many schools tend to provide tangible rewards to students who

improve their behavior or engage appropriately with others. These expenses may be an issue for

some schools, as the plan for implementing PBIS must be created with enough advance notice so

the school can obtain the necessary financial backing. It is also is important that schools which

choose to implement PBIS begin the planning process almost a year in advance so as to ensure

efficacy, as well as student and teacher buy-in. Successful program implementation involves

school-wide support. If such support is not obtained, the program may fail and the school may

have difficulty implementing it again in the future, as the staff may not be as willing to believe in the possibility of its success.

In addition to these school-wide programs, there are other, more individualistic strategies or interventions a school can implement to promote positive peer relationships among their students. One such strategy is the creation of a peer mediation program. Peer mediation provides students with an alternative to either resolving the conflict themselves or reporting it to an adult. Peer mediation provides students with a structured and voluntary process that offers them an opportunity to reach an agreement satisfactory to both parties (Sellman, 2011). Peer mediation, moreover, provides students with the opportunity for greater involvement in the school as a whole and encourages appropriate decision making. Basically, peer mediation involves training students who have been chosen to act as peer mediators, or who have volunteered to serve in this role, in conflict resolution techniques (Cantrell, Parks-Savage & Rehfuss, 2007). These trained student mediators then assist their peers in "finding peaceful resolutions to their disputes and disagreements" (p. 1). Some issues will not be resolved through peer mediation, in which case the peer mediator can review further options with the participants, such as discussions with a school counselor or administrator. Many students prefer not to talk with adults about disagreements with their peers, and peer mediation may encourage these students to engage in an open, honest conversation with someone regarding issues they may have with one another because they may feel they will not receive a negative consequence for their disagreement (Sellman, 2011). Peer mediation programs have been found to reduce school violence and encourage students to adopt a "more proactive identity in the conflict management process" (Cantrell et al., 2007; Sellman, 2011, p. 57). Sellman explains that this more positive outcome occurs because students who participate in peer mediation tend to feel greater

ownership over the conflict and appreciate the ability to participate in its resolution. One of the most positive aspects of a peer mediation program is that it does not require the participation of the entire school or community stakeholders and therefore can be implemented at any time during a school year, as long as the proper training is provided for the peer mediators.

Summary

The review of the literature available on promoting positive peer interactions among students in a school stresses the importance of proactive interventions rather than reactive interventions. All of the strategies described in the literature review are proactive measures a school can implement to decrease conflict between and among students and encourage positive interactions. By implementing one or several of these strategies, a school emphasizes the importance of cooperation among members of the school community and of understanding the causes of negative interactions among students or among students and adults. This, in turn, creates a welcoming environment for students, which likely will serve to motivate them not only to attend school regularly but to achieve at a high level in all of their classes (Burross, 2008). It is important to note that each of these strategies can be implemented in a school that in which peer interactions or relationships are not problematic, and will serve to improve the school climate as whole.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to determine the efficacy of a peer mediator training program by examining participants' self-reports regarding their conflict resolution abilities. This study is a descriptive study in which the researcher gathered quantitative data through the use of a survey. The data examined the participants' beliefs and perceptions about their abilities regarding conflict resolution and their knowledge of the peer mediation process after having completed the peer mediator training.

Participants

Participants consisted of a purposive sample of 12 students, all of whom were available for the training and were recommended by the staff at Kenwood High School in Essex, Maryland as excellent candidates for the peer mediator program. To be recommended, students had to have a minimum GPA of 3.0, have three or fewer unexcused absences from school in the previous year, and demonstrate the virtues of respect, compassion, tolerance, and confidence. As the peer mediation program would continue into next year, it was determined that there should be an equal number of participants from the top three grade levels at the school. Therefore, the sample included four seniors, four juniors, and four sophomores. The demographics of the sample were as follows: of the seniors, one was Caucasian, two were African-American, and one was Hispanic; of the juniors, three were Caucasian and one was African-American; finally, of the sophomores, two were Caucasian and two were Hispanic.

Instrument

Information was collected after the training was completed through the use of a written survey with six Likert-type scale items. The survey was developed by the researcher and consisted of six statements for which students had to rate their beliefs on a scale of one to five, with a response of one indicating that the participant strongly disagreed with the statement, while a response of five indicated that the participant strongly agreed with the statement. Finally, the survey also included an open-ended question regarding students' beliefs about ways to improve the peer mediator training process in the future. Students completed the survey at the conclusion of the five-week training program.

Procedure

This research process began with the researcher meeting with the student participants and explaining the peer mediation process, why the students were chosen for this program, what they would gain from the program, and the commitment required of the students.

The program that was used for the peer mediator training was one that was recommended to the researcher by the guidance department at the school and is a program that frequently is used within the researcher's school district: *Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools* (Schrumpf et al., 1997). This program includes 29 serial activities that explain the peer mediation process, ask students to examine their own beliefs about conflict resolution, examine sample peer mediation arrangements, and engage in sample situations they may experience as peer mediators. This training entailed three 40 minute sessions per week over the course of five weeks. Most of the work was done during the training, but some activities, such as those in which students had to examine their own beliefs about anger and judgment, were completed at home and only reviewed during the training. During training, students engaged in various

activities, depending on the training the program required for that day. Individual reflections, group discussions, brainstorming, and role-playing all were used during this training.

The survey was conducted on the final day of the training. The directions for the survey were read aloud to the participants, who then individually completed the survey on paper. The survey took approximately five minutes to complete.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a peer mediator training program, as determined by participants' self-reports on a survey regarding their knowledge of the peer mediation process and the effect of the training on their abilities related to conflict resolution. A total of 12 participants completed the survey; a response rate of 100%. The analysis revealed that the majority of the subjects felt peer mediator training helped them to understand the role of a peer mediator, the six steps of the peer mediation process, and the underlying causes of conflicts between their peers (see Table 1). Moreover, the majority of the participants also felt that completing the training made them better able to communicate effectively with others and resolve conflicts.

Regarding their understanding of their roles as peer mediators, 75% of the subjects strongly agreed that the peer mediator training helped them to understand their role, 17% agreed, and 7% were neutral. This implies that the peer mediator training was successful in defining the role of peer mediators. The training was much more successful in ensuring that the participants understood the six steps of the peer mediation process, as 100% of the participants strongly agreed that, having completed the training, they understand the process.

Regarding the effects of the peer mediator training on their own abilities, the responses were not as strong, though still positive. On the subject of their ability to effectively communicate with others, 67% of the participants strongly agreed that the training was helpful, while 17% agreed, and 16% were neutral. The response was slightly stronger for the peer mediator training process' effect on the participants' ability to resolve conflicts as 75% of the participants strongly agreed that their abilities had improved, 17% agreed, and only 7% were

neutral. Finally, 67% of the participants strongly agreed that the peer mediation training made

them better able to understand the underlying causes of various conflicts between peers, 8%

agreed, and 25% were neutral.

When examining the results, it is important to note that no students disagreed or strongly

disagreed with any of the statements, which leads to the conclusion that the peer mediator

training process did have a positive impact on students' self-perceptions regarding their

knowledge of the peer mediation process, their roles, and their abilities to confer with and

understand others.

Very few of the participants chose to complete the open-ended question about how the

peer mediator training process could be improved in the future. Two of the participants who did

complete this question suggested that they would like to engage in more role-playing activities,

as they felt that two sessions of role-playing were insufficient. The only other student who

completed the open-ended question suggested that the training take place earlier in the year.

These are all valid responses and, in the future, both suggestions will be made into policy.

Table 1 Survey Items and Reponses

Question	Response				
	Strongly Disagree				**Strongly Agree**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. I fully understand my role as a peer mediator.	0%	0%	7%	17%	75%
2. I understand the six steps of the peer mediation process.	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
3. Having completed this training, I am better able to effectively communicate with others.	0%	0%	16%	17%	67%
4. My ability to resolve conflicts has improved.	0%	0%	7%	17%	75%
5. I am able to understand the underlying causes of various conflicts between peers.	0%	0%	25%	8%	67%

These results and their implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to build the researcher's understanding of the effect of peer mediation programs by examining the effectiveness of such programs to determine whether providing students with the tools for peer mediation and conflict resolution would improve their self-perceptions of their own abilities regarding conflict resolution. The results of the study indicate that engaging in peer mediator training improve students' self-perceptions of their own abilities regarding conflict resolution.

Implications of Results

The results of the study indicate that students who engage in peer mediator training complete the training with a better understanding of the peer mediation process and experience improvements in their abilities regarding conflict resolution. However, the results suggest that students were more likely to report a greater understanding of the peer mediation process than they were to report a significant increase in their conflict resolution abilities or understanding of the underlying causes of conflicts between their peers. These findings indicate that peer mediation, or at least the first step in implementing peer mediation, the training step, would be an effective strategy for improving student peer relationships. The participants' self-perceptions about their abilities to communicate effectively with others, resolve conflicts, and understand the underlying causes of various conflicts between peers did improve due to the training. It is important to note that the results of this qualitative study only provide information about the training aspect of the implementation of a peer mediation program in a school and that further research is required to assess the practical results of a peer mediation program.

Theoretical Consequences

Based on these results, the training aspect of the peer mediator program appears to be a positive first-step towards building positive student peer relationships. As indicated by the results, students who engage in peer mediator training are better able to communicate effectively with others, an important element of building positive student peer relationships (Burross, 2008). The results also indicate that the participants felt that their conflict resolution techniques improved, which is important in improving student peer relationships in a school as it discourages confrontational and highly argumentative situations.

When examining the results from implementing the specific program used by Baltimore County Public Schools for peer mediation training, it appears that the program is effective (Schrumpf et al., 1997). According to Cantrell et al. (2007), peer mediators should be trained in conflict resolution techniques and fully understand the peer mediation process itself, which, according to the survey results, the program did accomplish. Moreover, the survey results indicated that the participants felt they were better able to communicate effectively with others, another important aspect of peer mediator training and of reducing student peer conflicts (Sellman, 2011).

Threats to Validity

There are several possible threats to the validity of this qualitative study. The first of these is the small sample obtained. Only 12 participants were involved in the study, and these participants had to be available at the same time, which indicates that a convenience sample was used. Moreover, the demographics of the sample were not proportionate to the demographics of the school as a whole, and several cultural groups were not included. Therefore, the narrowness of the sample limited the amount of information available and those examining this study should

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hesitate to make general conclusions regarding the effect of a peer mediator training program at their own schools and with different populations.

Regarding content validity, the survey instrument used was created by the researcher and completed using participants' self-perceptions. Though the statements the participants rated were well worded, it is possible that there was some misunderstanding of the statements and ~~that,~~ therefore, the survey items may not have represented the trait being measured. Though the survey items questioned participants' beliefs about their abilities regarding conflict resolution and their understanding of the peer mediation process, the statements were not specific and perhaps other statements could have been included to assess more thoroughly these self-perceptions.

Relation to Similar Studies

The study reported in this paper relates to a study conducted by Sellman (2011) in which it was found that those trained as peer mediators reported that they found the peer mediation process to be a useful tool, both for peer mediation and resolving conflicts in general. The results of this study are similar to this study in that those trained as peer mediators internalized the peer mediation process and therefore felt more comfortable resolving their own conflicts, as well as those of other students. However, Sellman's study focused more on the need to change the school's culture so that peer mediation would be successful, as opposed to the effects of implementing peer mediation on the school as a whole. Another study that examined the effects of peer mediation was conducted by Cantrell et al. (2007). Results from this study suggest that peer mediation not only serves to resolve conflict, but also served to reduce the levels of school violence. Though the study by Cantrell et al. focused on elementary school students, it was

similar to the current study in that students who were trained as peer mediators were equipped with negotiation skills and conflict resolution techniques through a structured training program.

Implications for Future Research

This study examined only one aspect of the implementation of a peer mediation program in a school: the peer mediator training. Because a small sample was used and the study was conducted in just one school, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study in other schools and with larger samples. Moreover, the peer mediator training is only the first step in the implementation of a peer mediator program and further research must be conducted regarding the efficacy of an actual peer mediation program and whether the implementation of such a program actually would improve student peer relationships in a school and reduce the number of conflicts experienced. At a time when schools are attempting to reduce office referrals and suspensions, the effectiveness of peer mediation programs must be studied. Several programs include claims that they can improve student peer relationships and thus reduce negative consequences. Such programs could be helpful to schools that are struggling with student peer conflicts which lead to detentions, suspensions, and even expulsions due to fighting or bullying.

Conclusion

There are several possible interventions a school can implement to improve student peer relationships. Rather than implementing a school-wide strategy, which can be extremely time-consuming, it appears from the results of this study that a peer mediation program would be successful in improving student peer relationships and reducing conflicts. This type of program does not involve the entire school and thus may be easier for a school to implement while still achieving results similar to a school-wide initiative such as PBIS or PYD. A peer mediation program is specifically targeted toward the students who are experiencing the most conflicts and

therefore may serve to reduce the number of consequences a school must enforce. As stated

previously, more research is needed to determine the overall effect of a peer mediation program,

but given the results of the study reported in this paper, this type of program may improve

student peer relationships, at least at the high school level.

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