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a peer mediation model: conflict resolution for elementary and middle school children

Pamela S. Lane
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One of the problems with conflict, as every school counselor knows, is that it requires inordinate time and energy from school personnel. This fact is not surprising. Young people accurately receive a clearly conveyed cultural message: if one person wins, the other must lose. Schools reflect the problems of larger society in various ways: fighting, bullying, vandalizing, absenteeism, acting out, and demonstrating racial antagonism. These frequent interpersonal and intergroup conflicts often begin as small tensions and escalate when unresolved.

School personnel endeavor to establish and maintain an atmosphere conducive to optimum learning. They also aim to educate students toward their future roles in our democratic society. If those in power merely mete out punishment, the development of students' sensitivity to and awareness of the way in which others are affected by their actions may never materialize. In guiding students toward a development of such an ethos, counselors need to turn away from the method modeled by our courts. They need to encourage win-win situations. Conflict resolution through peer mediation is a model that evolved from just that realization.

SCHOOL PEER MEDIATION: WHAT IT IS

School peer mediation is a mode of student conflict management. Two trained peer mediators work as a team to encourage problem solving between disputants. Often the setting for this mediation process is the playground. Used in conjunction with traditional means of discipline, such as suspension for serious violent acts, mediation provides a structured

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forum for the resolution of disputes on school grounds. Student involvement in the mediation process ensures practice with critical thinking, problem solving, and self-discipline. "The process of peer mediation is a self-empowering one—it enables students to make decisions about issues and conflicts that affect their own lives" (Maxwell, 1989, p. 150). This element of student participation in self- and peer behavior change is directly related to the developmental construct of self-regulation that an awareness of socially approved behaviors is a critical feature of the concept itself. Self-regulation, as described by Block and Block (cited in Kopp, 1982), involves the ability to postpone acting on a desired object or goal. Mischel and Mischel (cited in Kopp, 1982) noted that self-regulation requires being able to generate socially approved behavior in the absence of external monitors. The ability to self-regulate is a skill that must be practiced. As with most developmental issues, learning to self-regulate is an ongoing process. The school peer mediation model provides daily opportunities for reinforcement.

Background

School peer mediation programs have sprung up across the nation in the last decade. Many are based on community mediation models like the San Francisco Community Board Program (1982). Developers of the San Francisco Community Mediation Program had 5 years of experience settling disputes between neighbors and businesses before introducing its school-based Conflict Manager program. In this program, students receive 16 hours of training and role-play practice. They eventually become team mediators on the playground and in the lunchroom. Similar programs now exist in almost all major cities in the United States. The assistance of a community mediation school initiative trainer, though not essential, may be valuable in the training of school personnel and students. Just as in the community model, children who are taught to mediate conflict in the schools apply communication skills, listen to varying perspectives, evoke mutual contributions to the problem's eventual solution, and attend to feelings—all in an atmosphere of respect for the parties involved.

Theoretical Assumptions

Advocates of peer mediation in the schools assume that "children helping children" is a valid perspective from which to view program implementation and outcome. Much research literature supports this perspective. Kelly, Munoz, and Snowden (1979) concluded that there are several important advantages to including youth in preventive programs. Klepp, Halper, and Perry (1986) noted that peer leaders have been found to have greater credibility regarding student social interactions. "Peers serve as potent role models, demonstrate prosocial behaviors, create and reinforce norms that certain behaviors are deviant rather than acceptable, and promote alternatives to these activities" (Jason & Rhodes, 1989, p. 203). The student

mediators, especially, benefit from the program (Cahoon, 1988; Maxwell, 1989; Roderick, 1988).

School counselors are aware of the strength of programs that emphasize student involvement and student management. Youth in such programs tend to feel more committed to the intervention's goals and more interested in producing change among their peers. The success of school peer mediation programs has provided further support for these assumptions.

BENEFITS TO STUDENTS AND TO THE SCHOOL

Both student behavior and school discipline problems improve as a result of peer mediation. McCormick (1988) reported that at-risk disputants (students who had been referred frequently for discipline problems) were observed by teachers to exhibit shifts to cooperation after experiencing peer mediation, a change supported by a 47% decrease in self-reported aggressive conflicts, which occurred as a result of peer mediation program implementation. Also, "at-risk students who directly participated in the program developed more 'prosocial' attitudes towards conflict, but those who had only indirect exposure to the collaborative process maintained their 'antisocial' attitudes towards conflict" (McCormick, 1988, p. 73). For example, one at-risk student was trained as a peer mediator. His previous preference for resolving conflict in an aggressive style was replaced (over one semester as a mediator) with a reported preference for a collaborative style of dispute resolution. Such metamorphoses are described by McCormick (1988): "Troublemakers' were just as enthusiastic about the problem-solving process and just as competent to guide others through it as those peer mediators who were thought to be ideal students" (p. 63).

In another study (Araki, Takesita, & Kadomoto, 1989), results indicated that peer mediation increased empowerment and volunteerism with mediators and disputants becoming "the architects of their own futures" (Adler, 1987, p. 64). Counselors in this study noted that disputants who were nonlisteners became listeners through participation in the mediation process.

All students—both disputants or mediators—find within the process a place for talking about problems, learning more about the views of others, and practicing better communication in a nonviolent, nonjudgmental atmosphere. The words of one student summarize peer mediation's impact:

All I ever wanted to do was to fight. If someone said something to me I didn't like, I didn't think about talking, I just thought about fighting. I came into a mediation session as a disputant with four girls on the other side. I thought, "Who needs this? What am I doing here?" I just wanted to punch these girls out. I figured that the mediator would tell me what I was going to have to do. But she didn't. Instead she drew me out, listened to me. It felt so good to let it all out; then I wasn't angry anymore. I thought, "Hey, if this can work for me, I want to learn how to do it." (McCormick, 1988, p. 54)

Peer mediation also provides benefits for schools by reducing the number of discipline events. In one Hawaii school, the number of on-campus fights dropped from 83 to 19 over a 2-year period (Araki, Takeshita, & Kadomoto,

1989). At a New York school, these events declined by 50% (Koch, 1988). As mentioned earlier, an Arizona school reported a 47% decrease in the average number of aggressive incidents per month (McCormick, 1988). Finally, out of 69 mediated cases at a Milwaukee high school, 60 agreements were reached, and researchers recorded an 80% success rate for disputes mediated during the 1986–1987 school year (Burrell & Vogel, 1990). As more instruments for program evaluation become available (Lam, 1989), the benefits to students and to school climate will become increasingly more apparent.

TRAINING OF STAFF MEMBERS

The training sequence begins with presentation of the mediation program to the entire school staff. Often the school counselor and principal conduct this introductory session. After the presentation, each staff member completes a level-of-interest questionnaire in order to determine the degree of commitment to the process. If staff support for mediation is adequate (usually 80%), training of teachers and support personnel is initiated. Training duration in the elementary and middle schools is usually 8 hours. The content of this training includes communication skills that encompass active listening, reflection of feeling, message clarification, body language, giving “I messages,” brainstorming, types of questioning, and effective problem solving. The mediation sequence is identified, and adult responsibilities are delineated. Role-play is used extensively with the adult staff members, as it is later with the students.

TRAINING OF STUDENT PEER MEDIATORS

Once the adults have been trained, they plan and implement an orientation assembly to motivate students and alert them to the qualities of a good mediator. Role-play and skits are used to outline aspects of the program and the process.

As the time line for implementation nears, students who wish to become peer mediators nominate themselves or are nominated by others. Nominations may also come from counselors, teachers, and administrators. Final selection of mediators is completed by student vote. Selected students are then trained by adult staff members, sometimes with the assistance of a community mediation training consultant. Training for elementary and middle school students is 5 half days. The adult staff members teach the communication skills, which they reviewed in their own training. They guide the students through role-plays not unlike those they engaged in during the adult training.

The mediation sequence is introduced and practiced until it becomes a comfortable process for the children. This sequence involves four basic stages: introduction, listening, wants, and solutions. Appendix A provides a basic checklist of the sequence in a step-by-step fashion.

In the first stage of the peer mediation sequence, the student mediators

introduce themselves, offer their services (“Do you need a mediator?”), and walk to a different area to cause physical and psychological separation from the initial point of conflict. When the disputants and mediators are ready, the rules are reviewed and commitment to them is elicited. An assurance of confidentiality is given to disputants by the mediators.

In Stage 2 of the mediation sequence, the peer mediators reflect and restate content and feelings as they address each disputant in turn. Because no interruptions are allowed, disputants have the opportunity to hear the others’ perspective of the conflict and their resulting feelings.

With the guidance of the peer mediators, disputants express their wants in Stage 3 of the sequence. As the requests are heard and restated by mediators, clarity reduces anxiety about possible hidden agendas.

In Stage 4, disputants are asked what they can contribute to the resolution of the problem. The peer mediators restate and check solutions for balance. Then each disputant is asked if the proposed solution is mutually acceptable. An important step in this phase is asking if the problem is solved. Often disputants may wish to express a need to receive or to give an apology in order to smooth hurt feelings. The mediators then ask disputants how such a conflict could be handled differently in the future. Peer mediators close the sequence by asking former disputants to tell friends that the conflict has been solved, thus reducing the potential for rumors. After congratulating the students on solving their problem, the peer mediators complete a mediation report form. In this last step of the sequence, the peer mediators have an opportunity to review the quality of their guidance as they do their record keeping together.

When training is complete, student mediators receive recognition and uniform T-shirts, banners, or hats at an assembly. They are then assigned to recess duty in pairs. They meet twice a week with a staff program coordinator to discuss their successes and problems, to maintain and build new skills, and to handle scheduling problems. School counselors often introduce classroom guidance curriculum activities to promote general student awareness of the peer mediators and the service they offer.

IMPLICATIONS

The simplicity of the peer mediation process contributes to its success. The student mediators can easily implement the steps. They also provide support for each other. In the San Francisco Community Board (1982) demonstration video a young man who was formerly a “conflict maker” became a “conflict manager.” Sonny had this to say about his peer mediation experience:

I used to be a bully. I think because I wanted to get the authority—the power. Now, as a conflict manager, I get the authority and status I used to take. I’ve changed. Now I can feel what the kids feel and I can help them solve their problems.

Cahoon (1988), an elementary principal, noted that her “mediators learn valuable problem-solving skills: to think logically about processing the in-

formation presented to them, to see issues impartially, and to advise without censoring. They also gain recognition for their efforts” (p. 94). Roderick (1988) emphasized a valuable aspect of school mediation programs: “Young people have many choices besides passivity or aggression for dealing with conflict . . . [through mediation] we give them the skills to make those choices real in their own lives” (p. 90).

The Ripple Effect

Fewer playground problems and fewer referrals to the nurse and principal are consequences of program implementation. In addition, families also experience impact. Parents and students in peer mediation schools report that conflict in the home is resolved in new and more productive ways. Perhaps this supports the research conclusions of Frey, Holley, and L’Abate (1979). They emphasized that a by-product of mutually and peacefully resolved conflict is often a new intimacy in the family. They advocated teaching children to be vulnerable—to share their fears and hurts, not just their anger. This concept is built into the mediation sequence, as the elicitation of feelings, as well as information, is an important function of the mediation process.

Program trainers in the Phoenix area serving more than 70 schools (Terros, 1988) have compiled a list of reported benefits, which are presented here. Although empirical evidence is lacking (Maxwell, 1989), reports by administrators, teachers, and school counselors confirm many of these benefits:

- Pressure for staff members to be constant disciplinarians decreased
- Staff time saved
- Tension reduced
- Overall improvement in school climate
- Students’ leadership skills developed
- Student language skills enhanced
- Academic improvement of mediators
- Increased status among peers for mediators
- Improved self-esteem for both mediators and disputants
- Valuable problem-solving skills learned
- Practice received in self-regulation
- Improvement in self-discipline of mediators
- More openness in sharing of feelings reported
- Greater assumption of responsibility
- Student needs are met more positively
- Families report improved self-discipline at home
- Families note better listening all around
- Home conflicts resolved more effectively
- In society, effects will be cumulative as more children learn positive ways to resolve conflict
- Eventual reduction of violence hypothesized
- Possibility of reducing burden on court system

Counseling Ramifications

Elementary and middle school counselors are in key positions to institute peer mediation programs. Many of the skills and concepts are directly related to a developmental counseling philosophy in that the progressively acquired ability of a child to self-regulate is central to the peer mediation process. "Positive self esteem and self regulation can be fostered in students when they are given the opportunity to participate in decisions relating to their own lives" (Maxwell, 1989). School counselors can promote this developmental process through the implementation of peer mediation programs. Furthermore, counselors are in a position to open up mediation training to parents as part of a school-community outreach program. Conflict resolution through peer mediation is a preventive program as well—in the form of leadership training. It is also an integral component of a school's discipline plan. Finally, it is a way to meet the communication objectives of a guidance curriculum. Regardless of its placement in the overall picture of school pupil development, its importance for children and its implications for society are clear. Henderson summed up the perspective of mediation advocates:

The kind of communication we push in mediation . . . aims at clarification and compassion, as well as the use of intellect. You don't abandon your rational ability to calculate "can I trust this person or not?" But you also don't abandon your ability to listen to what they are saying and to make sense out of it from their point of view. (cited in Dolezal, 1989, p. 10)

CONCLUSION

When *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published, the needs identified as requisite in achieving academic excellence were listening, problem solving, oral language expression, and critical thinking. The conflict resolution model of peer mediation directly addresses these needs. These identified skills are directly taught in the process of mediation training. They are modeled and reinforced by the peer mediators. If children are to mature into adults who know how to solve problems while respecting the views of others, then mediation is not only a positive school program but an essential survival skill. Roderick (1988) observed, "At a time when human survival depends on finding alternatives to violence for resolving differences, there is no more compelling mission" (p. 90) than for counselors to encourage peer mediation programs so that the healthy development of children may be fostered.

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APPENDIX A

Peer Mediation Process Checklist

Introduction

1. Introduce yourself. Ask disputants' names.
2. Ask both persons if they want to solve the problem.
3. If yes, move to a different area to talk.
4. State the four rules:
 - a. Agree to solve the problem
 - b. No name calling or put-downs
 - c. Be as honest as you can
 - d. Do not interrupt
5. Go back and ask each person if he or she agrees to each rule. Restate rules one at a time and get a yes answer.
6. Explain that whatever is discussed will not be shared with others by the mediators.

Listening

7. Decide who will talk first.
8. Ask person #1 what happened . . . restate. Ask person #1 how he or she feels . . . restate.

9. Ask person #2 what happened . . . restate. Ask person #2 how he or she feels . . . restate.

Wants

10. Ask person #1 what he or she wants . . . repeat it.
11. Ask person #2 what he or she wants . . . repeat it.

Solutions

12. Ask person #1 what he or she can do to solve the problem . . . repeat.
13. Ask person #2 what he or she can do to solve the problem . . . repeat.
14. Evaluate solution for balance and fairness.
15. Ask each person if he or she agrees to the solution. Ask if problem is solved.
16. Ask each person what he or she could do differently.
17. Ask each person to tell friends that the conflict has been solved to prevent rumors.
18. Congratulate students for their hard work.
19. Fill out the Peer Mediation Report Form.