Peer Mediation

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Tier 1 & 2 Intervention

Children and adolescents often rely on their peers for social and emotional support. In addition, they may welcome the opportunity to function independently of teachers and parents and feel that fellow students have better perspectives on their problems (Chittooran & Hoenig, 2005). Schools can take advantage of strong peer relationships by implementing a peer mediation program. With the commitment and training of school professionals, families, and the community, a peer mediation program can serve as a valuable resource for teaching students healthy conflict resolution skills and creating a positive school climate.

What is Mediation?

Mediation is a process to resolve conflicts between two or more people who are unable to solve their disagreement or conflict independently. The process relies on an impartial third party, the mediator, to help individuals use communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills to resolve the differences between the parties, while reaching a mutually beneficial agreement (Chittooran & Hoenig, 2005). Mediation is always voluntary, meaning both sides must agree to mediation. It is based in part on the "win-win" approach to negotiation described in the book *Getting to Yes, Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Fisher & Ury, 1981) where the negotiator attempts to find a solution to the conflict in which both parties obtain outcomes in line with their underlying interests.

Mediation is distinguished from *arbitration* in that the neutral third party, the mediator, does not make decisions or decide issues. This is different from arbitration, where the arbitrator hears both parties and makes a decision regarding the dispute outcome. Arbitration is often not voluntary, but is required as a result of contractual agreements between the parties. Both mediation and arbitration are often employed as a means for avoiding lengthy and costly lawsuits and court proceedings.

Mediation in Special Education.   The use of mediation in special education may be a good example of how it is intended to provide an opportunity for conflict resolution, which avoids costly litigation. As a result of changes in the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act amendments of 1997, school officials are required to offer parents mediation if disputes arise which might otherwise move toward litigation. To accomplish this, most states or school districts contract with outside mediation centers to provide mediation

services related to these disputes, free of charge to both parties. Mediation can also be requested outside of the school by contacting the regional mediation center and explaining briefly the situation. The center will then contact the other party, and if both sides are in agreement regarding the mediation process, a meeting time and place will be determined (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.).

Mediators in these agencies are trained to help both parties come to an agreement regarding the present issue, but are not experts in legal or educational issues. If legal or special education expertise is necessary, the mediator will work with both parties to determine a way in which to bring the required expertise into the mediation. Common issues that mediators are hired to resolve are: disagreements surrounding identification, evaluation, placement, or quality of education provided; communication problems between parties; or relationship issues between family and schools (Nebraska Mediation Brochure, n.d.). Because mediators serve as neutral and unbiased third-party participants, no decisions will be made without both parties arriving at a mutually agreeable outcome. If this cannot be done, a due process hearing will be necessary to resolve the issue at hand (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.).

Similarly, these same mediation centers may provide mediation for a wide range of parties in business, government or individuals in a community. The goal for the mediator is always to find a mutually satisfactory outcome for both parties.

What is Peer Mediation?

In school settings, students are trained as mediators to address conflicts that might arise among students in the school, or between students and teachers. When disputes arise in school these mediators work with the disputing parties to resolve the conflict in a way that is beneficial to both parties. Issues can be referred to mediation by students themselves or by school staff. Once a dispute is referred to mediation, a peer mediator is assigned to meet with the parties and mediate a resolution to the dispute. If the dispute cannot be resolved, it may revert to the school administration for further action. In many schools this mediation process has been installed as a diversion away from the need for the normal office referral, and the reliance on adult authority to resolve school disciplinary issues. In addition to training in conflict resolution strategies, peer mediation provides procedural justice. This includes procedures to make just decisions, and future-focused problem solving experiences for the students as well as practice in therapeutic conflict resolution, with accountability for behavior, and for behavior change (McWilliam, 2010). As a disciplinary diversion program, peer mediation is intended to prevent conflicts that may result in office referrals, and thus ultimately lessen the need for exclusionary discipline consequences.

Visual courtesy of http://www.ealingmediation.org.uk/Peer-Mediation-In-Schools-Project.

Potential Benefits of Peer Mediation Programs

There are many benefits that a peer media-tion program can provide to students. In learn-ing the mediation process, students are given the responsibility and the tools to work out problems without parental or teacher supervi-sion, skills that they can use throughout their lives. Peer mediation also builds self-respect and encourages students to understand that their peers may have a perspective that is dif-ferent from their own (Rogers, 1994). With a peer mediation program, these non-violent conflict resolution skills are typically taught to all students in the school, and selected students are provided additional training to become peer mediators. Therefore, all students are given skills and the expectation to solve problems or disputes on their own using these strategies. When that is not possible students may call on a mediator to assist, bringing together the parties to find a mutually satisfactory resolution.

Students acting as mediators are taught a process of communication and problem solving used to help their peers mend their disagree-ments without confrontation or violence. Peer mediators learn that conflict can be constructive and positive and that it is part of their role not to make judgements. They also learn that an agree-ment cannot be forced and that a solution is not always easily reached (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Mediators are also taught the mediation process and strategies to facilitate mediation (McWil-liam, 2010). Students that seek guidance from the peer mediators will receive help formulating a solution that is acceptable to all parties and avoids placing blame on one another. In many schools, graduating mediators are asked to teach their skills to new student mediators in order to ensure a consistent number of active student mediators (Sellman, 2011).

In peer mediation, each participant has the choice to control the situation and resolve it in a productive way rather than turning to aggres-sion or resentment. A major benefit to this approach is that through the process of media-tion, students will come to a win-win rather than

a win-lose resolution (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Using interest-based negotiation in mediation assures students who are looking for help that the agreement will be mutually accepted and agreed upon and that there will be no one per-son who wins over the other.

Peer mediation programs seek to teach students to become mediators as a way to encourage them to constructively solve prob-lems, such as bullying and aggression (McWil-liam, 2010). Schools that implement a peer mediation program may find that it serves as an alternative approach to traditional punitive and/or exclusionary discipline practices by reducing the number of conflicts resulting in aggression. Students may also be more empowered by the peer mediation system, as they are able to express input and have a voice in the mediation process rather than having discipline imposed upon them (Sellman, 2011). Mediation, rather than exclusionary discipline, may also encour-age school engagement for at-risk students (McWilliam, 2010).

Caution About Peer Mediation

Schools vary in the nature of the disputes or situations that are subject to mediation. Generally disputes between teachers and stu-dents, and more serious incidents of student misbehavior, are not typically subject to media-tion in schools that employ this process. As a result, students may perceive that the media-tion strategies are intended only for minor or

"childish" disputes, and that adult authority is used for more "meaningful" disputes. While this outcome is not intended, it may suggest that schools implementing these procedures must ensure that adults are willing to support and be involved themselves in the mediation process, and that a wide variety of disputes are addressed using the process. If this process is to be valued by students, adults must support its value, and it must be employed across an array of "real" and "important" issues for students.

What Do We Know About Peer Me-

Our Peer Mediators reduce student conflicts at recess and on campus!

diation Programs?

Peer mediation programs have been shown to positively affect school climate and safety and can be used as a school-wide prevention strategy in teaching students nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution (Chittooran & Hoening, 2005). McWilliam (2010) conducted research on a peer mediation program implemented in K-12 public school in Australia and reported several promising results, including that nearly one-third of students felt happy after participating in the peer mediation program. Former students who participated in peer mediation also reported improved empathy and anger management. Even more substantially, 94% of teaching staff indicated noticing positive change in student behavior following participation in the pro-

gram. Teachers also noted improved job satisfaction, decreased stress, and reduced workload after their school adopted a peer mediation program. Furthermore, 60% of peer mediators voiced that peer mediation skills might be helpful in other areas of their life, suggesting improvements for not only at-risk students, but also mediators. Increased empathy, improved communication skills, and increased satisfaction with school were also mentioned as effects for moderators (McWilliam, 2010).

A peer mediation program is typically employed on a school-wide basis, and can have an influence on the communication, problem solving, and decision making of all students. For example, all students in a school may be familiar with the peer mediation program and be trained in its principles (e.g., ideas, attitudes, values about resolving conflict). Although the whole school may be trained in how to participate in mediation by reviewing confidentiality, note taking, and behavioral contracts, only a select group may participate in the program as mediators (McWilliam, 2010). According to Chittooran and Hoening (2005), these programs have been shown to reduce violent conflict and drastically limit the number of office referrals and school suspensions for misbehavior. In addition, early intervention programs can teach students nonviolent behavior, empathy, impulse control, and anger management (Rogers, 1994), as well as social skills (Mason et al., 2014). Peer mediation may also prevent conflicts from escalating into more severe disagreements (Sellman, 2011). Chittooran and Hoening (2004) have found that:

"…if these programs are used as an integral aspect of school-wide education for behavior change, peer mediation programs can build and strengthen school communities, encourage a proactive approach to problem solving, and facilitate the use of conflict resolution skills among all students" (p. 1).

Peer mediation can serve as an alterna-

tive to suspension or expulsion. It is more likely to replace students' ineffective strategies with healthy, effective problem-solving skills (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Landry, & Miller, 2000). For example, a peer mediation program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders that incorporated social skills training with other peers resulted in communication improvements for the targeted children and less exclusion during recess (Mason et al., 2014).

Though limited in number, recent studies of peer mediation have provided positive results in behavior and school climate improvement. Given that there has not been extensive large scale or controlled research on peer mediation programs, they should be regarded as promising programs, and school teams that choose to implement them should carefully gather data to monitor accomplishment of goals and to identify outcomes.

Graphic courtesy of http://www.ealingmediation.org.uk/Peer-Mediation-In-Schools-Project.

Mediation as a Discipline Alternative

School wide implementation of a peer mediation program has potential to positively affect school discipline procedures in several ways:
- For staff it can provide a problem solving rather than punishment orientation to conflict, and provide training in conflict de-escalation;
- It teaches and promotes problem solving

and conflict resolution strategy instruction to students, which has the potential to improve the school environment and reduce office referrals; and
- It can serve to divert some conflicts to be handled by mediators, which might otherwise have escalated to being seen as requiring school disciplinary action.

Establishing a Peer Mediation Program

An effective school wide peer mediation program is a substantial undertaking that requires planning, training, and ongoing implementation (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). There are many decisions that a school needs to make before implementing a program, some of which include:
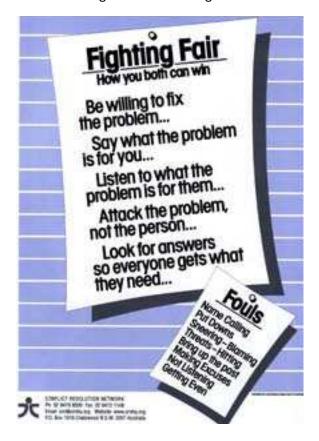- Which students will be chosen as mediators?
- How will students be chosen as mediators?
- Where and when will mediation occur?
- Will students mediate alone or in teams?
- What types of conflicts will student mediators address? (Skiba & Peterson, 2003)
- Who will supervise mediation?
- How much training is required of supervisors and peer mediators?
- How should the program be evaluated? (Biltz, 2002)

Advisory council. In most cases, it is recommended that an advisory council of school professionals, parents, students, and community members be created to aid in the planning and implementation of an effective peer mediation program. According to Biltz (2002), "it is crucial for a successful implementation of a program to have committed leadership, consistency, quality mediators, logistical support, disputant follow-up, and ongoing publicity" (p. 3).

Training of mediators. Training student mediators is another critical aspect of establishing a successful peer mediation program. Peer mediators are typically selected based on teachers' or an administrations' recommendations and must exhibit mature judgment, leadership abilities, and excellent verbal and nonverbal com-

munication skills (Chittooran & Hoenig, 2005). However, it is also advisable to have mediators who represent the cultural diversity of the student body, and not just the social or academic elite. According to Chittooran and Hoening (2005), responsibilities of the peer mediator include "monitoring the problem-solving process, maintaining confidentiality, and functioning in an unbiased, empathetic, and respectful manner to help students work together to solve their problems" (p. 12). The authors estimate that most programs require peer mediators to complete about 20 hours of initial training in conflict resolution, communication, negotiation, collaboration, and mediation.

Monitoring & maintenence. After establishing a peer mediation program, it is essential that the program be continually monitored. Skiba and Peterson (2003) state that the facilitators should monitor the extent to which the peer mediators are used (i.e., numbers and nature of disputes mediated), the success of the mediators in using the process and resolving conflicts, and how both the mediators and their peers view mediation. There should be a plan to provide continuing universal training about conflict

resolution to all students, and to replace mediators as they graduate or move to other schools. They also suggest that student mediators should receive ongoing training to ensure that they continue to be enthusiastic and effective. Another important component is an evaluation plan to monitor, measure, and report outcomes of the program and indicators of school success. This plan should include short- and long-term behavioral goals, behavioral outcomes, time-lines, evaluation criteria, and methods of formative and summative evaluation (Chittooran & Hoenig, 2005). Chittooran and Hoenig (2005) assert that a program's success will depend on leadership, building initial support among all of those involved and fostering their continued commitment to the program.

Example of a School Implementation of Peer Mediation

The material below is an example of some of the descriptive material from the website of the Waco ISD Peer Mediation Program in Waco, TX. (These materials are quoted from the school website at: http://www.wacoisd.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=428&pageId=47870.)

The Waco ISD Peer Mediation Program involves specially trained students of the same age-group who facilitate resolving disputes between two people. This process is changing the way students understand and resolve conflict in their lives. Changes include improved self-esteem, listening and critical thinking skills, and school climate for learning, as well as

reduced disciplinary actions and less fights. Both the Peer Mediators and the disputants they mediate learn skills that are transferable outside of the classroom and into their future adult lives. Each campus team is managed by a certified teacher who is the Peer Mediation Team Coordinator.

The process is voluntary for both sides.
Peer mediators do not "make decisions" but rather work towards a win-win resolution for both sides in order to avoid further trouble. Waco ISD School Administrators in charge of discipline have incorporated this conflict resolution process into their strategies in an effort to divert students from receiving a referral.

Types of problems that can be mediated include:
- *Social media improprieties*
- *Relationship difficulties/harassment*
- *Rumor and gossip*
- *Racial and cultural confrontations*
- *Classroom or extracurricular disputes*
- *Bullying, minor assaults and fighting*

Peer Mediation Program Documents from Waco ISD linked to their website:
- *Final Peer Mediation Request and Agreement Forms.pdf*
- *New Peer Mediation Exit Survey.pdf*
- *Peer Mediation Permission slip.docx*
- *Student Application PMP and SSA.docx*

The Waco ISD materials provide an example of how schools may implement peer mediation. No endorsement of this specific application of peer mediation should be implied.

Conclusion

The benefits of a peer mediation program can be school-wide. These programs can promote a change in attitude toward conflict, as students improve their perspective taking skills, develop leadership skills, learn to tolerate alternative points of view, and realize that they can respond in a more constructive way to frustrating circumstances. The strategies and skills learned become a process that defines values and leads to school-wide growth (Rogers, 1994). Peer mediation programs can provide a school with a positive climate. It is also an alternative to traditional disciplinary practices, but most importantly, students will learn conflict resolution and problem-solving skills that they can carry with them for life.

Resources on Peer Mediation

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program
The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program is the nation's largest and longest running school program with a special focus on conflict resolution and intergroup relations. The program is characterized by a comprehensive, multi-year strategy for preventing violence and creating caring and peaceable communities of learning that improve school success for all children.
http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa2lk16.htm

Peace Education Foundation
The Peace Education Foundation writes and publishes conflict resolution curricula and training materials that are used in more than 20,000 schools around the world. Their philosophy states that they believe in teaching children the skills they need to find creative and constructive ways to settle conflicts before they escalate to violence.
http://www.peace-ed.org/

Conflict Rresolution Unlimited (CRU) Institute
The CRU Institute is an organization that provides peer mediation, cultural awareness, and anti-bullying programs for faculty, students, and parents at elementary, middle, and high schools.
http://www.cruinstitute.org/

Conflict Resolution Education
Although published in 1996, booklet on Conflict Resolution Education (Crawford and Bodine, 1996) is a guide to implementing programs in schools, youth-serving organizations, and community and juvenile justice settings. It has advice, materials, forms and evaluation materials for those who would like to implement these programs. These authors have also written a variety of other books and materials on this topic.
https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/conflic.pdf

Conflict Resolution Network
Conflict Resolution Network provides free online resources specifically to help families and communities. These include a self-study guide, a conflict resolution trainer's manual, and handouts, as well as other materials and ideas.
www.crnhq.org.

Community Boards
Community Boards is a non-profit community resolution center based in San Francisco. "The Conflict Manager Program" is a resolution service and training center for students, parents, teachers, and administrators. It is one of the oldest peer-to-peer mediation models in the United States and selected students are trained as active problem solvers for a range of disputes.
http://www.communityboards.org

Oakland Mediation Center
The Oakland Mediation Center, based out of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, has a school-based peer mediation program called, "Peers Making Peace." This program is designed to equip students with the skills to resolve their own disputes, reduce staff time spent on discipline, prevent escalation of conflict, and improve school climate.
http://www.mediation-omc.org/OaklandMediaitonhomepage.html

Peer Mediators
This is a complete school curriculum for grades 6-8. All materials are free. This curriculum is designed to turn interest in peer mediation into a fully-operational and sustainable local program to address school conflicts.
http://www.peermediators.org/home

Win-Win Resolutions
This program was developed to reduce violence and prejudice in schools and communities by teaching conflict resolution and positive social skills through interactive drama and mentoring programs.
http://winwinresolutions.org/about/

Nebraska Dispute Resolution
Additional sources of implementation materials and training:
http://www.studygs.net/peermed.htm

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