Pupils resolving disputes: successful peer mediation schemes share their secrets

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In the final two articles of this issue, attention turns to initiatives promoting the active participation of young people themselves. Here, Hilary Cremin discusses the impact of her research and consultancy in peer mediation with young people in Birmingham primary schools.

Introduction

On the 2nd November 2001, less than two months after the 11th September, 60 young peacemakers met for a conference at the Pergamon Hotel, Digbeth, Birmingham. The mediators were aged between nine and eleven, from 15 schools where, for a number of years, pupils have been trained in how to resolve the playground disputes of other pupils. At a time when world conflict was preoccupying adults, this multi-ethnic group of young people met to share ideas on how to promote peace and friendship in the playground. I was privileged to have been involved in setting up and running this conference in partnership with the staff and pupils of Stanville School, Birmingham. The day was made particularly memorable by the fact that both the chief education officer of Birmingham LEA, Prof. Tim Brighouse, and the right honourable secretary of state for education, Estelle Morris, attended part of the day in order to present the children with medals which had been produced by the Birmingham mint to celebrate their achievements. For my own part, I wanted to know how the teachers and pupils in these schools would explain the success of their peer mediation schemes. This seemed particularly important, given my experience that so many peer mediation schemes in schools seem to fold within the first couple of years. What was it about these schemes that meant that they succeeded where others had failed. Were pupil perceptions the same as those of their teachers? What practical strategies had the teachers and pupils in these schools implemented that had meant that peer mediation in their schools had survived over the months and years?

In this article I will provide a background to the conference, the peer mediation work that I have been involved in over the last ten years through the West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project and Catalyst (see below), and my previous research. I will then outline the research methods used to answer the research questions highlighted above, before going on to discuss the main research findings gained from the conference.

Background

Catalyst

Catalyst is a small business which offers training and consultancy to schools and community groups wanting to set up mediation services. As its director for eight years, I had been involved in peer mediation research, publications and training of pupils and teachers (see for example Stacey, 1996; Stacey & Robinson, 1997; Stacey, Robinson & Cremin, 1997). Most of this work was carried out in Birmingham. Peer mediation, in essence, involves pupils being trained to offer a conflict resolution service at break and lunchtimes for peers who have fallen out with each other. The training of peer mediators usually takes place over three full school days. In most schools, peer mediation builds on a programme of Circle Time which aims to provide children with the language and skills of conflict resolution. For more information about the nuts and bolts of setting up a peer mediation service in a school see Stacey (2000).

The conference

The head teacher and staff at Stanville School, who hosted the conference, had the idea over a year ago. They felt that the presence of peer mediators in the playground was making a big difference to the quality of lunch and break times, and they wanted to offer their children the opportunity of meeting up with other mediators from elsewhere in the

city. Catalyst Consultancy from Leamington Spa, who had provided the original peer mediation training, were asked to come back into school to help organise the conference. Fifteen other schools known to be operating peer mediation in Birmingham were invited to send three pupils each, with a teacher. The day was made possible by a grant from Quest Millennium. The head teacher and staff of Stanville School also wanted their pupils, and other peer mediators in Birmingham, to receive some acknowledgement for their skill and hard work. Suka of Hockley, Birmingham, who make Lord Mayor's chains, kindly offered to make a peace chain to commemorate the day with the name of schools attending engraved on each link, and the Birmingham mint donated medals for each child.

Previous research evaluating the effectiveness of peer mediation

My previous research evaluated the effectiveness of a peer mediation programme in three primary schools in Birmingham (Cremin, 2000). It used pupil questionnaires and teacher interviews to measure changes in levels of bullying, levels of pupil self-esteem and locus of control, following peer mediation training of Year 5 (9–10-year-olds) and the setting up of a peer mediation scheme. The findings for schools 1, 2 and 3 are summarised below:

School 1

In School 1 all members of the school – staff, lunchtime supervisors and pupils alike – were keen to participate. There was also extensive staff training. The programme built on a negotiated, well-established code of conduct and reward system, and pupils were consulted about decisions that would affect their daily lives in many different ways.

The head teacher was prepared to facilitate the programme through staff training, and realistically assessed the starting points and training needs of the pupils and staff. She required her staff to review their own attitudes towards power, control and blame, in order to develop strategies to support pupils' emerging feelings of empowerment and self-esteem. Pupils were able to practise personal, social and conflict resolution skills in real situations, and this led to a positive school culture. My assessment of the school culture and ethos is that they were child-centered and humanistically orientated.

In this school the following changes were noted:

- there was a reduction in the frequency of pupils reporting being a victim of bullying
- there was a reduction in the frequency of pupils reporting bullying others
- types of bullying that appeared to have reduced were physical bullying, teasing and psychological bullying
- pupil self-esteem improved after an initial dip, which suggests that pupils were undergoing some far-reaching reassessment of their self-concepts
- pupil feelings of empowerment improved
- pupils developed more negative attitudes towards bullying
- after the peer mediation training programme, pupils had improved their ability to resolve conflicts, to give and receive positive comments, to cooperate, to communicate, and to listen to each other. By the time the peer mediation scheme had been running for two terms, they were beginning to transfer these skills to situations outside of the classroom, and many pupils had developed a high level of competency in these areas
- pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties appeared to gain a great deal from this approach, with all pupils benefiting from a general reduction in disaffection and aggressive behaviour.

Schools 2 and 3

In the other two schools peer mediation training was administered but no peer mediation service was set up following the training. In these two schools, the programme was limited and the head teachers appeared to overestimate the skill level of their staff in solving conflicts without confrontation. It also appeared that pupils were sometimes discouraged from talking about bullying, with victims ignored or blamed by some teachers. Structured lessons, teacher control, and playground supervision were used as anti-bullying strategies, and negative behaviour was at times excused on the grounds of supposed lack of parental skill and support. The code of conduct and reward schemes were still being formulated in both schools. In these two schools there were no apparent changes in pupil levels of bullying, self-esteem and locus of control. This is perhaps to be expected, given that neither of these schools fully implemented the peer mediation programme.

The findings from my previous research, highlighted above, suggest the importance of teachers understanding and valuing the principles behind peer mediation, which are essentially humanistic in origin. This appeared to be particularly important for the head teacher. Twenty years ago teachers were more familiar with the concepts behind humanistic psychology and education (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) than they are now. They were concerned to create a 'child-centered' classroom and to ensure that learning was built on the interests and abilities of individual children. In the current educational climate, this is becoming harder and harder to achieve, with a standardised curriculum and an emphasis on content and results detracting from more process-oriented methods. This means that peer mediation is often set against the prevailing school culture. According to the above findings from this earlier research (Cremin, 2000), peer mediation appeared to be set against the prevailing culture of the two schools which failed to complete the programme.

I was therefore particularly keen to carry out this research, as it attempts to find out what it is about the schools that are successful in establishing and maintaining a peer mediation

service that makes them successful. Is a humanistic, child-centered school ethos really as important for the success of peer mediation as my research suggested?

Research methods

Rationale

The research was carried out using qualitative research methods. The essentially humanistic research methods that I used enabled me to research peer mediation interventions that were already in place through the eyes of the participants. The humanist is sceptical of standardisations of social and educational interventions and services and doubly sceptical of any attempts to make them standard for the sake of investigation. Stenhouse (1987) prefers the 'medical' to the 'agricultural–botanical' paradigm for educational research, recognising that medical practitioners and researchers have traditionally reported individual cases which illuminate the incidence and treatment of particular conditions, rather than depending heavily on the control of variables.

The sample

Fifteen primary schools were used for this research. The main school that organised the conference, Stanville Junior and Infant School in Birmingham, is in Sheldon in Birmingham. Stanville, in common with the other schools, is an urban school in Birmingham with mixed social and ethnic intake. The other 14 schools were invited to attend the conference on the basis that that they were known to be operating peer mediation services in Birmingham. This ensured an otherwise random sample of schools from both the inner and outer rings of the city of Birmingham.

Each school was asked to send one teacher and three Year 5 pupils (Stanville sent 15 Year 5 mediators). The teachers were chosen by the schools following an invitation addressed to the 'peer mediation co-ordinator'. Some of these teachers were relatively senior in the school, whereas others were just starting out in teaching. One or two were learning mentors or learning support assistants.

Data collection

In order to gather basic information about how the services operate, one mediator per school was asked to stand up if a descriptor of peer mediation applied to them. The descriptors are listed in Figure 1 below. They were read out one at a time to the whole group during the morning of the conference. The activity took no more than ten minutes. The number of pupils standing up for each descriptor was recorded. Pupils did also fill in a questionnaire, and the results from this will be published elsewhere as it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss them fully.

In order to elicit what the teachers felt had contributed to the success of their peer mediation schemes, a co-researcher carried out an unstructured group interview in which the teachers were asked stimulus questions whilst the pupils were occupied in workshops during the afternoon. The question was: 'What factors do you feel are responsible for the success of your peer mediation schemes?' The ensuing discussion was recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The number of pupils standing up for each descriptor was simply recorded in a table and findings are discussed below. No attempt has been made to generalise or analyse the findings statistically.

The teacher interviews were analysed by grouping the findings into 'domains'. These arose naturally from the discussions, and were identified by the researchers. It was relatively easy to group the findings as the teachers were responding to each other, and the discussion followed themes that were easily identifiable. A summary of the contributions from the teachers, using their own words wherever possible, is recorded in Figure 2.

Research findings

Service profile

The following table shows the results of asking one peer mediator per school to stand up if the following applied to their school mediation service, or to themselves.

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICE	NO. (MAX 15)
Service operates in the playground	5
Service operates inside the school	10
Mediators wear badges	5
Mediators wear caps	5
Mediators wear tabards, sweatshirts or t-shirts	5
Mediators have produced a display with photos, details of the service etc. somewhere in the school	15
Mediators have done an assembly explaining their service	15
Mediators have met with lunchtime supervisors	7
Mediators have provided mediation training for teaching staff	7
Mediators operate a rota system for deciding who mediates when	15
Mediators sometimes mediate KS1 disputes	7
Mediators involved in more disputes between boys	5
Mediators involved in more disputes between girls	8
Mediators have had to stop a mediation because disputants have broken the rules	7
Mediators have carried out at least one successful mediation	15
Mediators have carried out many successful mediations	8
Mediators have used their skills at home	8

Figure 1: Table showing a profile of how peer mediation services operate

The above table shows that successful mediation services have a high profile with displays, assemblies and clearly visible ways of identifying mediators in the playground and around school. The array of badges, caps, sweatshirts etc. that pupils wore on the day of the conference was a testament to the inventiveness and individuality of each group of pupils. Almost half of the services had involved the pupils in meeting with all lunchtime supervisors and teachers in order to ensure effective communication. One third of the services operated in the playground with two thirds operating in the school. The advantages of having mediation inside and outside have been discussed elsewhere (Stacey, 2000), but it is clearly perceived by the majority of the schools to be advantageous to have a room away from the hurly-burly of the playground. The rota system is well used as a means of ensuring that pupils do not lose too many of their playtimes.

The mediators who attended the conference were all in Year 5, but just less than half of them operated their service for all pupils in the school from Year 5 through to infant level. Although there is not a large difference, it does appear that the service is accessed more by girls than by boys. This is in accordance with findings from elsewhere (Johnson and Johnson, 1996) and suggests that girls are either better equipped to engage in the process of mediation, or that they have a greater need to talk though problems and disagreements in order to restore friendships.

It is heartening to discover that the mediators were being used, with all of them having had the opportunity of putting their skills into practice in a real-life setting, and just over half of them having completed many mediations. In less successful services, I have seen pupils become discouraged when their newly found skills were not being used effectively due to poor take-up of the service. It is also heartening that peer mediators were using their skills at home, which suggests that they had become fully assimilated. The fact that half of the mediators had had to stop a mediation because the disputants broke the rules suggests that the mediators had the confidence to assert themselves in a difficult situation and that they were clear about the boundaries of their role.

The staff discussion group

Figure 2 shows the results of the group discussion. I have grouped teacher comments into the themes that emerged during the discussion. The main elements of successful peer mediation schemes according to the teachers are: pupil empowerment; a whole school approach; resources; support of mediators; choice, rewards and incentives; and social skills training for all pupils. These findings correlate with the findings of my earlier research (Cremin, 2000), in particular the importance of an ethos in which pupils feel empowered and of training the whole school community in effective conflict resolution. The role of the head teacher is, predictably, central to ensuring a high profile, efficient and well-resourced peer mediation service.

The teachers discussed how they tried to empower their pupils. The word 'empowerment' is out of vogue in some circles as it has been used rather liberally in settings where there has not been a genuine devolvement of power. These teachers believe that their peer mediation services are genuinely pupil-led and that pupils have feelings of ownership and empowerment. The re-creation of the social systems of democracy and employment are identified as ways that schools can both educate pupils for citizenship and life outside school, and provide structures in which pupils can practise responsible power and control. One teacher summarises by saying that she tries 'to stay out of it'. The ability to do this and to allow pupils to make their own mistakes safely is surely the gift of an inspired educator!

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL PEER MEDIATION	TEACHER COMMENTS
Pupil empowerment	Pupil-led Onus on the children Empowering for them Democratic Pupils elect the mediators Linked with voting system of school council Pupils deal with application forms, selection and interviews We try to stay out of it
Whole school approach	Support of senior management Annual budget Status Part of school life Need to keep it going Can easily slip if not given high profile Hard if you are class-based Needs support from colleagues Needs a constant push You need to know the children Easier when embedded into school practice as the years have gone on Children know expectations of Years 5 and 6, strong routines
Resources	Time/money/materials needed Trips important We meet with other schools for bowling, discos, etc. The more mediators the better With 16 there is a critical mass
Support	They know that we are here for backup Fortnightly meetings to keep enthusiasm going Strict boundaries about what they should be dealing with Emotional pressure not too great Refer fights and bullying back to an adult Five-minute debrief before registration Need to get things off their chests. We do that every day
Choice, rewards and incentives	Some year groups need incentives Use computer suite to design reward certificates for other children Accept when children say they don't want to do it any more Need a get-out Opt-out clause at the end of every half term Contract makes it official
Skills training	Need Circle Time in all classrooms to develop skills Year 5 class doing ten weeks of conflict resolution training to prepare them for selection of mediators Programme from nursery to Year 6 doing Circle Time weekly in assembly time Class representative has a slot to feed into Circle Time Children develop skills to mediate by learning to talk about their problems in Circle Time

Figure 2: Teacher discussion group findings

The term 'whole school approach' has similarly become jaded in recent years, with so many advocates claiming that it is the only way that this or that initiative can work. Despite the over-use of the phrase, it is nevertheless the case that initiatives do need the support of the whole school community in order to achieve success. Peer mediation is shown here to be no exception, with the teachers listing several aspects of what a whole school approach means in practice. Head teacher support is vital. Expressions of this support include providing an annual budget for the peer mediation coordinator, and providing time to ensure that the service maintains a high profile amongst teaching and non-teaching staff. Status comes from the peer mediation service becoming embedded in school life, with clear expectations and routines.

Difficulties in maintaining a whole school approach include the feeling that there needs to be 'a constant push' and that the service 'can easily slip if not given a high profile'. Where colleagues are not supportive, a whole school approach becomes more difficult. It also becomes more difficult if peer mediation coordinators are class-based (and therefore have to give priority to their own class) or, conversely, if they don't know the mediators beforehand.

Resources, as ever, are identified as being essential to the success of peer mediation initiatives. Beyond the need for the proper training of staff and pupils (usually carried out over three days) the budgetary needs of peer mediation are mainly tied up in providing badges, trips and incentives for the mediators. Several of the teachers involved in this discussion had already formed links which enabled them to arrange trips and parties in common.

The teachers spoke of the need for ongoing support and rewards for the mediators. Some groups of mediators seem intrinsically motivated with no need for any reward, whereas others seem to need other incentives. All of the teachers spoke of the need to provide opportunities for the mediators to debrief and feel supported by the adult responsible for the peer mediation service. Some teachers were doing this on a fortnightly basis, whilst others were doing it every day. It appears to be important that the mediators are also clear about the boundaries of their role. In particular they were told what sorts of disputes they should hand over to an adult, and when their 'post' would end. One teacher stressed that it is important to accept when a child doesn't want to do it any more, whilst another said that they have contracts in their school with an opt-out clause at the end of each half term.

The final area that the teachers stressed as important was the use of initiatives such as Circle Time to prepare the ground, consolidate and extend peer mediation services. This correlates with the findings from my previous research (Cremin, 2000) which suggested that the best possible strategy for preparing the ground for peer mediation was 30 minutes of Circle Time per week across the whole school. Circle Time can be used to teach key personal and social skills such as listening, cooperation, impulse control and collaborative problem-solving. Building pupils' skills in these areas goes beyond the development of effective conflict resolution practices. It also develops conflict prevention practices. I have written elsewhere (Cremin, forthcoming) about the need for Circle Time to be founded on a clear spiral curriculum with the same targets and learning outcomes as in any other curriculum area. Used in this way, pupils can practice key social skills in a structured setting in which they are not being expected to do too much too soon.

Conclusion

Peer mediation schemes, then, need to be about more than tokenism if they are to thrive and last over months and years. They need to be founded on genuine empowerment of young people, and a belief that disputants really are best equipped to resolve their own conflicts. What is more, this belief system needs to be backed up with resources and a commitment to making peer mediation work. This will entail time and money. Peer mediation is not an easy option. It is not about abandoning a group of pupils to manage as best they can in the turmoil of playground life. It is about a careful and well-managed strategy for enabling young people to take a greater degree of responsibility over their own lives and relationships, with the full support of a dedicated staff team.

Peer mediation can be a highly successful strategy. Not only is it beneficial in promoting happier and more peaceful playgrounds, but it also educates young people in the crucial skills of responding creatively to conflict. In my experience conflict resolution skills are like a second skin – they grow with each child, becoming more sophisticated as the child moves into ever more complex relationships. The ability to resolve conflict peacefully is fundamental to survival as never before, as recent world events have shown. It is difficult to argue that there are more important things that children need to learn as we move into the 21st century.

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