



What does anyone know about peer mediation?®

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Abstract

Peer mediation is a popular way to manage conflict in schools. Typically, a school trains a small group (cadre) of pupils who offer mediation services to other pupils at break and lunchtime. The article examines research published in the last 10 years and concludes that this is likely to be a disappointing approach. The author argues, from the literature, that schools are more likely to reduce bullying and low-level disruption by making the study of conflict a central part of the curriculum of the school – for parents, for teachers and for pupils.

Keywords bullying, conflict management, critical reasoning, peer mediation, violence prevention

Introduction

Peer mediation is a method of managing conflict in schools in which children are trained to help protagonists in conflict discuss their needs and feelings and to come to peaceful solutions for their differences. Peer mediation also gives those who have been trained the skills to render conflict superfluous and to solve the inevitable disputes that occur where there are conflicts of interest. It is of interest because of its potential contribution to the growth of democratic skills in society. Cremin attempts a justification for pursuing peer mediation when she says:

The ability to resolve conflict peacefully is fundamental to survival as never before . . . it is difficult to argue that there are more important things that children need to learn as we move into the 21 Century. (Cremin, 2002:142)

There is an argument that people who learn to resolve their personal conflicts peacefully are more likely to resort to democratic means to express dissent from government policy. In the turbulence caused by the bombings in London in July 2005 this argument would suggest that any initiative in schools to facilitate mediation rather than escalation of conflict would be in the nation's interest.

This article attempts to survey the literature of the last 10 years to determine what researchers have learned about attempts to teach children the techniques of peer

mediation. Do the schools in which these experiments have taken place suffer less violence, less bullying? Do they experience fewer arguments? Do children spend more time in achieving mastery of the curriculum?

Societies that seek to *eliminate* conflict become totalitarian. Conflict can, however, be *managed*. Shulman tells us that: 'The peer mediation approach assumes that conflict is a normal and positive force that can accompany personal growth and social change' (1996: 171). However, the increasing cultural mix of citizens means that people in the same street, in the same office, on the same bus, at the same football match, approach situations not only with different and conflicting interests, but with different assumptions about what is right and proper. People are also experiencing social isolation, created perhaps by TV, pressures of work, the desire for privacy and choice; and this isolation makes management of these conflicts of assumptions and needs more difficult to achieve. Bickmore notes that:

Pluralist diversity is ubiquitous and makes conflict resolution essential, while at the same time technological and economic developments encourage individualism and fragment social relationships, thereby making community building and conflict resolution more difficult. (2001: 144)

The writers of the research reported in this article use the term 'Peer Mediation' to describe schemes in which schools or researchers train pupils to help protagonists manage conflict in a positive way. Usually the schools studied are primary or elementary, occasionally middle, and rarely secondary or high schools. Most reports are from the USA; a few are from the West Midlands of England. Usually, teachers or researchers select a small group of children for training (a 'cadre'), although a few train whole cohorts.

A search of 'Academic Search Elite' and 'Ingenta Select' for peer reviewed articles in English in which the title or abstract contain the words 'peer mediation' yields about 25 references dated since 1994 (in contrast, a google search on 'peer mediation' produced 554,000 hits). A few of these articles have more or less rigorous methodology, others contain views of people who have been involved in peer mediation. One difficulty is that, generally, authors have an interest in reporting positive aspects because they are involved in teaching the programmes that train peer mediators and, presumably, they wish to continue their involvement. I have not found an evaluation by a third party. Negative findings, unwelcome to the researcher, as well as the results of rigorous methodologies, are therefore the most interesting aspects of the literature.

Evaluation of peer mediation trials

The teaching of peer mediation

For those interested in the teaching of peer mediation, Chetkoff-Yanoov (1996) offers a survey of techniques; I shall not provide a manual of how to instruct young people in peer mediation. The first decision that has been taken by those who wish to introduce peer mediation into a school is whether to teach techniques to the whole school or year group, or to teach a cadre who will serve as mediators. It may be that pressures of curriculum time or research budgets dictate the approach used. Where the first approach is taken, there appears to be a hope that children will solve their own problems; where the second approach is taken, the hope seems to be that a group of peacemakers will keep conflict under careful management by intervention in others'

disputes. These are two quite different aspirations. Frequently, researchers describe the cadre approach with reference to potential leadership roles for the cadre. Those who train a cadre frequently do it as an after-school activity, and intervention in disputes is nearly always at break or lunchtime. The use of out-of-curriculum time indicates that peer mediation is not the core business of the school, but something tacked on. Authors comment that this must be obvious to the children.

Most of the programmes reported in the literature at least set out to offer pupils a chance to practise their newly found skills, although several report that the pressures of curriculum time reduced the amount of training and experience to a few hours in a full year. Some trainers do, however, appear to believe it is sufficient to teach children how to mediate without any supervised practice. Again, this sometimes depended on funding, and on the willingness to commit time to activities. Shulman, for instance, advises that:

. . . without an opportunity to apply and develop their skills, students responded to mediation training as another exercise having little relevance to their daily lives. (1996, 174)

and Cremin says:

. . . the evidence here is suggesting that the training programme alone is not enough to reduce bullying, or to induce more negative attitudes towards bullying. For this, the experiential learning involved in peer mediation may well be needed. (2000: 153)

A string of educators urge teachers to believe that learning occurs, not as a result of what is done to children, but what is done by children. Few teachers would now think that children could acquire competence in English criticism, in watercolour techniques, in playing a musical instrument, or in geographical survey techniques, without practice; although practical experience has been speciously eliminated from the science curriculum in the name of safety, and from the technology curriculum in the name of 'design'. Trainers have found that schools are reluctant sometimes to devote 'curriculum' time to peer mediation activities or to training because academic standards will be threatened, but this anxiety is not supported by data. Bickmore (2001: 146), in her meta analysis of several 'service learning' studies (learning that occurs during service to others) shows that, contrary to popular belief, the time spent away from regular classroom tasks for such active learning experiences has no negative impact and, in some well-designed programmes, has a positive impact on children's academic achievement. Stevahn, in his survey of 10 years of literature, says:

Conflict training enhances academic achievement. Students scored higher on classroom achievement and retention tests and used conflict procedures to analyse academic material in another subject area. (2004: 56)

The ideal training situation was perhaps engineered by Farrell et al. (2001), in their programme 'Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)'. They secured weekly sessions throughout the year, taken from other curriculum time, for conflict resolution studies. The children, mainly Afro-Caribbean, experienced behavioural repetition and mental rehearsal of peer mediation, along with experiential learning techniques. All the trainers were African-American men providing role models for the largely African-American children.

Several schemes include mixed-age tutoring, in which one responsibility of the cadre is to teach the next cohort of pupils. Shulman, for instance, has found that:

Older students can be involved in the actual teaching of conflict resolution to younger students . . . it may be more readily grasped through peer interchange than through adult child instruction. (1996: 175)

This is in line with many investigations into mixed-age tutoring. Cohen et al. (1982), Fitz-Gibbon (2000), MacGilchrist et al. (2004), and Gaymond et al. (2004), all report great gains in understanding amongst those children who teach skills to younger pupils. However, schools still seem resistant to capitalizing on the undoubted efficacy of encouraging children to learn from other children and allowing children to learn by teaching. Sellman (2002) emphasizes a mixed-age tutoring approach to peer mediation training, saying that ensuring the sustainability of a programme demands that children should be trained a full 18 months before they leave, to allow them to practice and then to prepare younger pupils to assume the role of peer mediator.

The most exciting study (if not the most independent) of peer mediation training is undoubtedly in the Tomlinson and Bender (1997) account of cadre training in a South Carolina High School. This gives a graphic, step-by-step account of the training of successive cadres of children (by first author, Kimmie Tomlinson), dealing with important background details such as lighting levels, mood music, and other measures to encourage disclosure and sharing of feelings. They report great team spirit developing amongst children who might otherwise be at war.

In a rare English study, of a boys' comprehensive school in the West Midlands, Carter and Osler (2000) took a 'rights of the child', (see <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>), approach in preparing a class of 14- to 15-year-olds for peer mediation work. They focused on problem solving, decision making, addressing each other by name, and affirming each other's good points. The skill of mutual support during criticism is fostered in a growing number of schools, see for instance, Flecknoe (2004b).

Although there are many different schemes, originating in different universities and private agencies, there seems to be agreement on the basic techniques taught, although great differences as to whether the principal effect is on a cadre which then offers a service to the whole school, or to the whole school directly.

The selection of a cadre

How schools and researchers select children for participation in the cadre is significant, revealing much about power structures in the school. Occasionally, the cadre is chosen at random; more often, children with 'leadership potential' are chosen. Sometimes pupils with a history of leadership in opposition to the norms of the school are included, but more often they are not. Tomlinson and Bender (1997) deliberately chose equivalent numbers of students who had shown either positive or negative leadership characteristics and so did Bickmore (2002). Her peer mediators were children whose social leadership potential had been exhibited in negative or positive ways and who were representative of the school's entire racial, cultural and gender populations. These are the only two researchers who report the inclusion of 'negative' leaders; those who do not fit in with the system are almost universally ignored in cadre selection.

More common is the approach described by Humphries (1999), in which teachers choose those who have contributed positively to the school climate. Another example is found in the account of Schmitz (1994), who worked with third to fifth grade

elementary children. The school allowed all children a vote for those to take part, subject to a veto by staff. This method immediately stamped a conflicting authoritarian style on what might have been a democratic process. Bell et al. (2000) report that children selected a pool of candidates and faculty (staff) selected those they believed to be confident problem solvers from that pool, echoing Schmitz (1994). Johnson and Johnson (1996b) offer the opinion that adults who act as referees or judges put children in a dependent position, thereby depriving them of opportunities to learn valuable social skills.

If a cadre has to be selected, rather than all children being trained and experienced, there are strong arguments to suggest that efforts should be made to represent the student body in as many characteristics as possible, not just natural leaders and not just those sympathetic to the school ethos. Bickmore puts it like this:

Diversifying student mediator teams opens democratic space by giving voice and learning opportunities to students with various viewpoints and school experiences, including those whose views may differ from the dominant cultural approaches of school leaders. (2001: 158)

The debate about how cadres should be chosen begs the question as to why all children should not be trained. The decision to choose a small group seems often to be decided by a prejudicial attitude that peer mediation or conflict management training is not contributing to the major effort of 'teaching the curriculum'. If a school decides that time spent on training children to deal with conflict will detract from curriculum studies, a small group, willing to give extra time, is the natural target. The hope that a small group can reduce the levels of conflict in a school by mediating at lunchtime between opposing parties is not well founded. I shall later draw attention to other changes that are generally thought to be necessary by researchers who have been disappointed by the results of training a cadre.

Methodologies to investigate the effectiveness of peer mediation

The difficulties that beset educational evaluation generally are also found in evaluations of peer mediation. These fall into the following categories:

1. What can be measured that is relevant?
2. How can a control group be ethically constituted?
3. In the absence of a valid control, how can the influence of external changes be minimized?

The first of these difficulties begs the question, addressed by Cremin (2000), as to whether anything can be measured with validity in this field which is so complex as opposed to just complicated – Lewin (1992). I would add another difficulty of measurement and that is independent reliability: all of the evaluations are carried out by people who have an investment in the schemes of peer mediation leading to improvement in the school climate.

The first difficulty is illustrated by Hart and Gunty (1997), who point out that the quality of peer mediation skills in a school is often measured by the amount of peer mediation training in the school; and that the success of a project may be judged by the decline in the incidence of child conflicts at the treatment schools. Both of these relationships are problematic. An extensive methodology has been devised by Johnson

and Johnson over a period of time in different settings to improve on these measures. Johnson and Johnson (1996a) noted the nature of the conflicts which children mediated; the amount of mediation undertaken by each child; the number of conflicts instigated by each child; and the results of the mediation. This methodology was able to measure change of aggression and ethos, albeit obliquely. They then abandoned reality for simulation in subsequent publications. Johnson and Johnson (1996b) only measured the five dependent variables:

1. total recall test (written);
2. delayed total recall measure (written) at the end of the year;
3. conflict scenario (written) two weeks after training;
4. conflict scenario (interview) two weeks after training;
5. teachers and Principal attitude (interview).

None of these simulation measures could record any change of child ethos directly, or a decrease in aggression in the school, unlike their other work published in the same year. Their later publication, Johnson and Johnson (1997), correlated training in peer mediation against knowledge of mediation procedure and ability to apply it in simulated written scenarios. Again, this methodology did not record change of ethos or aggression.

Where observation is used, it is usually limited because it is so costly. The study by Humphries (1999) of 18 peer mediators in an all-white elementary school in Salt Lake City, for instance, used 12 hours of observations in the playground together with interviews. They also observed how well children could correctly remember and carry out the five steps of conflict management. Although this method does satisfy the first difficulty in providing a measurement of a relevant dependent variable, there is no attempt to control for external factors, or to judge whether the observed behaviour constitutes an improvement.

Farrell et al. (2001) used self-reporting as an instrument in their study in urban middle schools for mainly African-American children. They found surprising lack of correlation with other data about the extent, for instance, of involvement in fights, where self-report appeared to make exaggerated claims. However, there was a high correlation between self-report and drug use; numbers of disciplinary incidents providing a triangulating reference for self-report. Self-report is an interesting attempt to address the first difficulty mentioned above, but their work would indicate that reliability is suspect.

Segregating children into treatment and control groups is fraught with ethical traps, it is also very difficult because teachers in reported studies often demanded the right to select children whom they thought to be suitable. Clearly, those not selected, even though they may be matched for many variables, were different in not being considered suitable (Bell et al., 2000). Uniquely, Farrell et al. (2001) randomized children to an intervention group of 321 and a control group of 305, and Smith et al. (2002) produced matched treatment and control cohorts of 25–30 children in a four-year study of delayed treatment design, but these are the exception rather than the rule. Any randomization that is achieved between cadre and control groups within the school leaves the control group subject to the influence of having a cadre in the school. This means that their behaviour may be affected in some way by any changed climate of the school.

Control group children in the report of Farrell et al. (2001: 456) surprisingly reported more positive attitudes supporting non-violence than those in the intervention group, although other indicators showed a stronger effect on the cadre. The within-school design meant that control children benefited from less violence and a climate created by increased mediation, without themselves participating. A between school design would eliminate this. For instance, in the natural, quasi-experiment of Bickmore (2001), the same programme was implemented in six different schools and she was able to observe the different effects of different ethos and power structures between schools. Any observed effects within or between schools may, of course, be owing to external changes concurrent with the programme.

Addressing the third difficulty mentioned, Bell et al. (2000), in a very well-argued article, describe their work with 30 sixth to eighth graders, who were trained to serve as peer mediators to 798 pupils in Western Tennessee. They claim to present the first study to use data from several previous years so that trends could be spotted. This was again a cadre-approach peer mediation programme. They tracked the number and outcome of mediations; teachers filled out questionnaires before the study and at a 12-week follow up; they read all discipline reports; and the number of office discipline referrals for peer mediators was compared to the number of a random sample of 30 peers matched for grade, sex and race. Comparisons were made controlling for the previous year's referrals. This methodology probably represents the best currently available.

What becomes apparent is the great difficulty of evaluating a programme of peer mediation. In a cadre programme, ideally two groups of children should be selected at random or by stratification using as many measures as possible. One group (at random) should be the control group. Even then, it is likely that the control group will show benefits, and indeed this is the aim of the programme. Measures would need to include data from several previous years in the programme school and from neighbouring schools to detect trends and eliminate external influences. The data would need to include numbers of mediations, the results of mediations, the number and type of disciplinary incidents, and some qualitative data from staff and children. In addition, data would be needed about changes in the attitude of the school toward power-sharing with children.

Observations of researchers

Many children seemed to like becoming peer mediators. This could be because of the extra attention they received, or because they recognized that they were learning new skills, or because their own conflicts became less stressful. Schmitz (1994) reports that 90 per cent of the children wanted to become peer mediators, and this level of enthusiasm is largely reflected in the reports of other researchers. Bickmore (2002: 35) too, in her work in elementary schools in areas of poverty in Cleveland found over 70 per cent of Grade 3–5 children said that they would like to be peer mediators. However, Humphries (1999), in her work in elementary schools in affluent areas of Salt Lake City, reports that one third of mediators lost friends as a result of their activities; many were teased and reported negative popularity among peers.

Where success is reported, there are often qualifications. For instance, while Schmitz (1994) reports that children resolved 89 per cent of 172 conflict situations peacefully,

and that in the first year of the programme the Principal estimated that conflicts referred to his office after recess dropped from 10–15 per week to one every two weeks, one problem was that teachers on recess duty became less attentive in their supervisory role. The involvement of adults is critical; Bickmore summarizes:

Too little adult involvement risked putting mediators or their clients in dangerous situations, while too much or excessively directive adult involvement impeded students from participating in a truly alternative form of dispute resolution. (2002: 36)

We may conclude that Schmitz observed an unsustainable phenomenon because the improvement led to a reduction of adult supervision.

The children in the report of Johnson and Johnson (1996a) successfully mediated 323 conflicts in a year and most commonly resulted in an agreement between the protagonists to avoid each other. Whether 'avoiding each other' should be judged to be an entirely positive result is a moot point, but the scale of the mediation is heart-warming.

Some pupils in the Carter and Osler (2000) 'rights-based' approach felt that rights were synonymous with weakness. Rights were perceived to be derived from teachers and therefore not innate. Rights were seen by some children as a result of favouritism. Some staff felt only children had rights, suggesting a link between child rights and bad behaviour. Some staff feared that the introduction of democratic approaches in the classroom would undermine teacher control and be a license for mutiny. This has echoes of the work of MacBeath et al. (1996) in Scottish schools.

Some researchers report mainly lack of success. Smith et al. (2002: 573) tell a sad story from Florida, in a huge study of three middle schools in a deprived rural county school district, each with 780–1140 children. The peer mediation curriculum comprised a school-wide conflict resolution programme of just five lessons. The cadres had a two-day workshop in addition. Eighteen hundred children and 100 staff were surveyed each year. The curriculum and mediation programme did not result in significant school-wide change in child attitudes toward conflict and communication or in teacher attitudes about school climate. The authors of this study discuss the futility of adding on a programme without changing the ethos of the schools.

Other studies report unqualified success. The model study of Bell et al. (2000) found that children performed 32 successful mediations out of 34 at a six-week follow up. They found a trend to fewer discipline referrals and the largest decrease in suspensions as a percentage of total enrollments that the school had had in three years. There were significantly fewer office referrals during the intervention year for cadre members compared to the control group whose referrals did not decrease.

The positive findings are encouraging, but each researcher could be thought to have an interest in positive results. The negative indications seem to arise from tensions between the ethos of peer mediation and the ethos of authoritarian school organization, however benevolent. Conflict is also indicated between those within the cadre and those without; this is to be expected unless the ethos of conflict management is a whole school ethos.

Peer mediation and physical violence

There were positive results on the reduction of violence. Farrell et al. (2001: 456) report that rates of disciplinary violations for violent behaviour were less than half in

the cadre than the control group; and in-school suspensions one fifth; cadre members were less than half as likely to be injured in a fight and in need of medication and twice as likely to have sought peer mediation. Tomlinson and Bender (1997) report that, of 1000 disputes, only one finished up in a fight. In the study of Bickmore (2002: 36), punishments for violent behaviours were considerably reduced in project schools and, while Cleveland's overall suspension rate went up by 2 per cent, the main project schools went down by 25 per cent. Clearly, there is some impact on violence. However, a number of the boys in the study of Daunic et al. (2000) perceived mediation as a sign of weakness. It may be that there is ground to cover before boys want to avoid violence in some cultures. Bickmore (2002: 36) found that peer mediation helped the boys to catch up to the average girl in their attitudes and understandings for managing conflict. This resonates with the girl child resolving arguments between dolls whilst her brother is zapping and whamming aliens. In contrast to the positive results, Bell et al. (2000) reported that physical conflict decreased only slightly. They ask whether verbal and physical conflict are impacted differently by peer mediation techniques.

Rebecca Gajda was uniquely placed in the vicinity of Columbine High during the shooting incident to study school violence, Gajda (2002). In her work based on this, Gajda (2000: 18), she identified specific school factors that contribute to school violence. They include:

1. a general belief that disadvantaged children have limited potential;
2. irrelevant classroom instruction and inappropriate teaching methods;
3. economic and racial segregation;
4. unclear or inconsistent discipline policies.

The beliefs of teachers and principals, and the school organization that results from parental pressure for segregation and the pedagogic pressure to 'do the curriculum to children' rather than encourage learning and aspects of disciplinary policy, have a great effect on the prevalence of violence. Against this pressure towards violence, peer mediation must be considered to be a good influence. Curwin, in a largely polemic article, says:

. . . fighting is the only way that some students know how to maintain dignity, win the respect of peers, or to be successful. Even if most students are not chronically violent, those who are cause fear and disruption for everyone else. (1995: 72)

There is evidence that peer mediation can reduce violence, in the same way that sticking plaster can reduce bleeding. In the same way that an effective health and safety policy can reduce the need for sticking plaster, effective, peace-based schools (see, for instance, Hart and Hodson, 2004) may include education in peer mediation within an appropriate power structure.

Power issues

Bickmore (2001) defines democratic learning as having three components:

1. modelling;
2. critical reasoning;
3. sharing authority with children.

Some programmes appear to ignore, or have to work round, all three in favour of the

didactic teaching of five steps of peer mediation; these programmes tend to have less positive results. Sellman (2002: 10) outlines what he calls the pyramid of conflict resolution:

1. arbitrated conflicts;
2. pupil conflicts that are mediated;
3. conflicts that pupils resolve by negotiating with each other;
4. conflicts that never occur because of a supportive school environment.

He says that peer mediation schemes frequently fail because they are not compatible with the existing school culture or its vision. This is a recurring theme.

Peer mediation requires of school culture a shift from teacher control to pupil empowerment and from arbitration to mediation as the dominant form of conflict resolution. Sellman (2002: 9)

Sadly, most of the schemes described in the literature were undertaken in schools where there was no modification of the traditional teacher–pupil, or of the principal–teacher relationship. These relationships frequently seek to eliminate conflict with authoritarian responses, and the less-powerful partner usually sees this response as aggressive or violent. Carter and Osler, who use the UN convention on the rights of the child as a framework for designing a peer mediation scheme, say:

Some teachers run their classrooms on exclusively authoritarian lines, demanding unquestioning obedience from students . . . some excluded students may well be reacting against inappropriate work, lack of support . . . (2000: 340)

This style of education does not encourage independent thought, or criticism of authority (Bickmore's point two above). The balance of power that results in receiving and giving respect, maintaining a peaceful and constructive working atmosphere, is a difficult one to strike. The more that teachers fear losing control, the less likely they are to give respect to children and to encourage an ethos in which criticism can be given lovingly.

Cremin takes this further:

The amount of power that teachers are prepared to accord to their pupils in their everyday learning environment must have at least as much effect on pupils' feelings of empowerment as a peer mediation programme. (2000: 176)

She is saying that a conflict *management* programme will be less effective in a school where there is an ethos of conflict *arbitration* based on imposed authority. Rosenberg (2002) makes a well-argued case that all punishment and reward systems, as imposed authoritarian systems, are aggressive acts, and offers a radical new method of schooling which would hold little surprise for Holt (1971), Neil (1969), Reimer (1971) or Stenhouse (1975) for instance, but which would probably horrify Anderson (1982). My own experience of supervising the research of teachers and education welfare officers who were committed to reward systems, indicates that these systems rarely succeed in achieving their ends. Bickmore puts it much better than I could:

Assertive discipline's emphasis on inflexible rules and teacher control seems quite contradictory to the spirit and practice of peer mediation . . . all assumed that the program's emphasis should be on changing children's behaviour, not on changing adults' behaviour or authority relations. (2001: 148)

But extensive investigation into reward and punishment systems may be seen in Aubrey-Hopkins and James (2002), Deci et al. (2001), Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000), and Starratt (2002) amongst others.

Cremin (2000: 56) identifies the most common cause of conflict between adults and children in school as the discrepancy between the needs of pupils, as perceived by themselves, and their needs, as perceived by teachers. She says that it is in both the size of the discrepancy, and in the way that teachers respond to the resulting behaviour, that the culture of the school is set. It is clear to her that school organization can either minimize or maximize opportunities for creative conflict resolution.

Carter and Osler (2000: 350) think it is difficult for some children to adopt positive behavioural models when control is the constant theme. Children in their study school had few examples of either teachers or pupils working cooperatively together and therefore had difficulty imagining a cooperative classroom.

Power issues seem to be central to the success of a peer mediation scheme. Teachers and schools who change their approach to one in which critical reasoning regularly results in disagreement being aired without temper being roused seem to succeed better in managing conflict. In these classrooms, children and teachers can make sure that their needs are met without infringing on the rights of others. Schools are crowded places in which rights and responsibilities rub shoulders closely and sometimes painfully. Schools are part of, and offer a superb preparation for, 'real life'; they can prepare children to become managers of conflict; or alternatively to take the role of either crusher or crushed.

Lessons learned

Part of the success of the study of Bell et al. (2000), as well as their very thorough methodology, was the way in which they maintained contact with the schools in which they had trained a cadre in peer mediation by phoning or calling in person each week. They view this contact as integral to success. Their constant contact kept peer mediation at the top of at least someone's agenda at the school. This is perhaps an indication of the effort that someone has to make to change the culture of a school.

Farrell et al. (2001) found that peer mediation provided real life opportunities to practice skills learned in violence-prevention curricular. They suggest that providing the curriculum separately is not worth the effort, and that interventions targeted only at children, even if they include the opportunity to practice, may not be adequate; teachers need to follow a programme too. Theberge and Karan put it like this:

. . . all members of a school community especially administrators, teachers and counselors, need to make a commitment to use conflict resolution and mediation at all levels. (2004: 292)

Farrell et al. (2001) go on to suggest that, because violence occurs in multiple contexts: home, school and workplace, it is essential that violence prevention strategies be comprehensive in focus and address multiple risk factors across significant contexts. Theberge and Karan again:

. . . a truly comprehensive program would include small group training for students, families and faculty. (2004: 293)

D'Oosterlinck and Broekaert (2003) suggest that most teachers are not trained in

dealing with conflict and crisis situations. There is no part of the compulsory and demanding curriculum for Initial Teacher Training in England, for instance, that requires teachers to show an ability to manage conflict. An analysis of 600 child–staff conflicts by D’Osterlinck and Broekaert, reveals at least four categories of inappropriate responses by teachers toward child behaviour:

1. counter-aggressive reactions;
2. rigid and unrealistic teacher expectations;
3. negative teacher moods;
4. prejudicial attitudes toward troubled children.

Clearly, children who act as peer mediators can feel as though they are urinating to windward under such external pressure.

The widespread changes indicated by these authors reinforce the point above about the size of the task facing those who would manage conflict peacefully.

Bickmore (2001: 158) reflects that mediators, just like other children, need some time to relax. There is a temptation to load the mediators with activities at break and lunchtime, and to use out of school time for training. Bickmore suggests that this is a mistake. She goes on to suggest that, as the peer mediation programme is of such benefits to the cadre, it would be a pity if such opportunities were not available to a wider range of children. The reason for using children in this way stems from a lack of belief that the skills of peacemaking will benefit children in the rest of the curriculum.

Most schools failed to address the critical reasoning aspect of democratic learning. There was little evidence that children were being taught to think critically as part of a peer mediation programme. A universal complaint permeates higher, further and school education, about students’ lack of critical reasoning powers, and programmes are in place in most institutions specifically to address the issue of critical thinking. However, it is a threatening activity. When using critical thinking, ideas are valued for their intrinsic worth in the reasoning of the recipient, not for the status of their originator. This is an anti-authoritarian stance, and most of our schools are authoritarian in ethos.

The utilization of peer mediation for managing conflict is up to the children who experience the conflict. Not all may be motivated to do so, especially in the authoritarian situations that have been described. Theberge and Karan (2004), in a year-long, qualitative study using interviews and surveys in a New England city junior high school of 1000 children from 21 nationalities, found that 95 per cent of the school knew about the mediation programme but only 9 per cent had used it. Children said that they feared mediators might laugh and they preferred to settle problems themselves. The authors conclude: ‘. . . mediation needs to be accessible, confidential, and clearly delineated from punishment’ Theberge and Karan (2004: 293).

Stevahn summarizes lessons learned from 12 studies over 10 years: kindergarten to high school; special needs to gifted; diverse ethnic backgrounds; various language settings and states; urban, suburban and rural. He remarks on the similarity between the curriculum for peer mediation, and the skills required for many learning- and wealth-generating activities in real life:

Many of the social skills that enable successful teamwork (e.g. presenting positions,

listening attentively, communicating, understanding, generating integrative solutions, and reaching mutual agreement on the best course of action) are the same skills that underlie constructive conflict resolution. Empirical evidence indicates that without training, many students may never learn such skills. (2004: 50)

The evidence is that the teaching and practicing of peer mediation confers many of the skills that are valued by employers, and this begs the question as to why it is not thought important enough to be a core part of any school curriculum. Stevahn goes on to explain that much of the core curriculum offers scope for a critical examination of conflict resolution skills. Whether the 'subject' is English or physics there is a possibility of using constructive negotiation and mediation procedures to resolve issues embedded in the content:

Open any novel or storybook, for example and you will find conflict almost immediately. Conflict hooks us, piques our curiosity, and makes us wonder how each dilemma will be resolved. (Stevahn, 2004: 51)

Postman outlines several narratives that might help to justify participation in education to modern young people, one of which is 'the narrative of the fallen angel' (see Postman, 1996: 114–28). This narrative takes as its starting point the mistakes and errors that wise people have made in their thinking, the conflicts that arose and the resolutions that followed. He would agree with a curriculum that focussed on conflict resolution. It would be easy to study the English National Curriculum and to receive the impression that knowledge is unproblematic and given, and that no conflict exists. The passion for 'facts' may well be a result of this view of knowledge. Many of us find that real life comprises a succession of conflicts to be managed, rather than certainties to be learned.

Looking to the future

My reading of this literature leaves me with the impression that adding on an abbreviated study of conflict resolution, for some pupils, largely in their own time, may enhance the skills of that cadre of children. It may influence the power structure in a school slightly. It may enhance the self-esteem of that cadre. It may help to reduce bullying a little. However, the real prize is to be gained by making the study of conflict a central part of the curriculum of the school, for parents, for teachers, for pupils. The sort of low-level classroom disruption of which teachers so often complain requires the conflict management skills of all concerned. Without adequate conflict management, the education of many children is at risk of disruption. If our children can leave school able to understand that others have different opinions and assumptions; that managing the conflict leads to productive working relationships; that criticism can be given and received lovingly; and that situations can usually be organized so that each person has their needs met; then our education system will be worthy of the name and worth the money that is spent on it. It may be that such a curriculum must first be introduced into our teacher training courses and into the studies required in preparation for leadership in schools Flecknoe (2004a). Readers may consider that this issue is even more pressing now that they have seen the effect that four young men can create when they chose to escalate, rather than mediate, conflict situations.

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