Good Training is Not Enough: Research on Peer Mediation Program Implementation

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What is peer mediation?
Young students can learn to help each other resolve interpersonal conflicts in school. This paper reports research on one exemplary conflict resolution education program, the Elementary School Initiative of the Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in the Cleveland Municipal School District in Ohio, USA, 1997-99. The study examined peer mediation’s role in (and effect on) the social environment in several inner-city elementary schools, and found that it had positive effects.

Conflict — disagreements and problems resulting from divergent wishes or needs — is inevitable in human life, and can be a positive force for learning and development. The goal of conflict resolution education is to reduce the disruption and harm that can arise when conflicts are mismanaged, by helping students and educators to develop skills and inclinations that support constructive nonviolent conflict resolution. Mediation is one process for facilitating conflict resolution: an unbiased third party (mediator) helps disputants to talk about and handle their problems. Mediation is a voluntary procedure in which individuals seek assistance, but retain control of the solutions: mediators do not judge or counsel. School-based peer mediation is student-facilitated dispute resolution.

The simplified process used in CCR’s peer mediation is similar to that used in school programs throughout much of the world (Cameron and Dupuis, 1991; Hall 1999):

- Establish each participant’s independent consent to participate and to keep the proceedings confidential.
- Each participant tells her/his own view of the problem.
- Washington, D.C. Mediator assists the participants to communicate together to understand the solvable parts of their problem.

- Mediator guides participants to generate and describe possible solutions, and to negotiate a resolution that they both/all can accept.
- Affirmation and closure.

Individuals seek assistance, but retain control of the solutions

At the elementary school level, mediation sessions are typically short, informal discussions, conducted near where the original dispute occurred and ending with verbal agreements.

Most school-based mediation programs, including Cleveland’s, use a ‘cadre’ approach to peer mediation: a small group of students in each school are trained, outside of regular classes, to provide the mediation service. Less frequently, some programs train whole classes, grades, or school populations to handle conflict and to take turns acting as mediators. The student mediators in a cadre program typically meet and work together as a peer leadership team with an adult advisor, to deepen their own skills and to promote the use of nonviolent conflict resolution in their school communities. This extra-curricular youth leadership approach to peer mediation has spread widely, because such programs involve low cost and require minimal organizational change, yet participants believe they make a difference.

Previous research
Until recently, little systematic research was available regarding the implementation or effectiveness of conflict resolution programs, including peer mediation, in schools. However, practitioners’ interest and commitment to peer mediation has fueled the rapid spread of these innovations in schools across much of the world (CREnet, 2000; Hall, 1999).

Where there are sufficient mediators on duty, peer mediation programs are associated with reduction in physical aggression (Cunningham et al., 1998). Peer
The student mediators themselves have the most sustained opportunities to practice the roles and skills associated with nonviolent problem-solving. Thus, the selection and support of the students who will receive this learning opportunity is an important consideration. Strong peer mediators are not necessarily ‘good’ students. Because mediation involves persuasion (to choose a nonviolent option) and leadership (to facilitate the negotiation process when participants are upset), mediators must be influential among their peers to be effective. Teams of peer mediators that include students of diverse academic abilities, genders, and cultural groups tend to be stronger, more sustainable, and more effective than homogeneous teams (Day-Vines, 1996). Students who previously had been aggressive or disruptive frequently become particularly effective peer mediators (Cunningham et al., 1998; Lupton-Smith et al., 1996). Where some children are excluded from peer mediation teams because of academic weaknesses or non-compliant behaviour, those students are denied benefits and programs are less effective.

Program Context
The Cleveland, Ohio, school district is fairly typical of large urban districts in the northern United States. Its 1997-98 enrolment (76,000) was approximately 70% African-American, 20% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic/Latino, and several other ethnic and language groups. The median income of students’ families was about 22% lower than the state’s average. The graduation rate was about 42%, half the state’s average (Ohio Department of Education Figures). Many Cleveland school buildings were in serious disrepair: stress was evident across the system.

The Cleveland Municipal School District Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) was formed in 1995, from the successful training arm of the district’s Winning Against Violent Environments mediation program. The CCR program uses the same basic model as most school-based peer mediation programs, with one important exception: the trainers are not professional teachers, but diverse urban youth enrolled or recently graduated from that school system. In the research program, a team of 25 - 30 elementary students and one or two adult advisors from each of 28 project
schools received program development assistance and
an intensive three-day peer mediation training led by
CCR. Peer mediators were children, grade 3-5, whose
social leadership potential had been exhibited in negative
and/or positive ways, and who were representative of
the school’s entire racial, cultural, and gender
populations. Adult Conflict Management Program
Advisors met with mediators regularly to practice skills
and co-plan activities, facilitated referrals to mediation,
and coordinated their school programs. The program
emphasised the implementation of peer mediation in
each school and the engagement of the youth as leaders
in spreading nonviolent conflict management throughout their
schools.

The same basic program was given to a range of
elementary schools in this city
district. CCR provided training,
guidelines, resources, and
professional development for
implementing peer mediation
programs. Because authority was delegated to
the program advisors and mediator teams to interpret and
implement the program, the programs took different
forms in the various elementary schools.

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like to be peer
mediators

Method
The study focused on the development,
institutionalisation, and consequences of mediation
programs for whole elementary schools, and in particular
for diverse 8-11 year old students, over two academic
years. Qualitative evidence, from 28 project schools,
includes observations and interviews with administrators, program advisors, other teachers, peer
mediators, and other students at each school at the end
of each year, supplemented by interviews and meetings
with program trainers and advisors throughout 1997-99.
Quantitative evidence, from 18 project schools,
includes a survey regarding conflict management
understanding and attitudes, completed by all grade 3-
5 students in each school before and after one year of
program implementation. Changes in disciplinary
suspension rates and achievement test results were also
assessed.

Results
The Center for Conflict Resolution’s elementary conflict
management program showed positive results after one
year of implementation. Many or most grade 3-5
students in nearly all project schools (orally assessed in
their classrooms at the end of the project year) showed
significant familiarity with the purpose and process of
peer mediation. In a few schools, many younger students
also were well-informed about mediation. Over 70% of
the grade 3-5 students said on surveys that they
would like to be peer mediators, which indicates
program prestige. Post-test scores on the Student
Attitudes About Conflict (SAAC) survey, in schools
that implemented the program, were significantly higher
than pre-test scores on the survey taken as a whole
(average +0.09 points on a 5-point scale) and on three
thematic sub-scales. Students’
average understanding and
inclination toward nonviolent
conflict resolution increased
significantly (+0.10), as did their
assessments of their own
capacities to handle conflicts in
interactions with peers (+0.08).
This indicates that peer mediation
was associated with improvements
in grade 3-5 students’ understandings, feelings of
efficacy, and willingness to nonviolently handle conflict.
Students’ attitudes toward attending and participating
in school also improved significantly (+0.11),
apparently due to the implementation of peer mediation.
Although the pre-post difference was positive (+0.06),
one year of program implementation was insufficient to
significantly improve the average student’s perception
of school climate. Schools that more thoroughly
institutionalised mediation (as indicated by qualitative
data) had stronger school climate results than other
project schools, so full implementation of CCR peer
mediation programs may indeed improve school climates.

Pass rates on the grade 4 Ohio Proficiency Tests
of citizenship and reading achievement increased in CCR
project schools considerably more than the district
average. This suggests that CCR’s peer mediation
program is associated with increases in students’
academically-relevant skills and their comfort in school
— perhaps because it helps them to resolve personal
problems so they can focus on learning. Students’ time
out of class to practice conflict resolution can be an
academic advantage, not a disadvantage. Grade 3s’
and grade 5s’ over-all SAAC score increases were
considerably stronger than grade 4s’. This is because

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opportunities to participate in this program by teachers or principals, on the mistaken assumption that such activity would be detrimental to these Ohio Proficiency Test results. In schools where grade 4 students were allowed to participate as actively as other students, their results were equivalent to other grades.

Average SAAC scores, especially in peer relations, were considerably more improved for boys than for girls. Girls’ pre-test SAAC scores were significantly higher than boys’, and showed little improvement during the project. Peer mediation apparently helped the average boy to ‘catch up’ to the average girl in their attitudes and understandings for managing conflict. The high variations among individual students’ perceptions of school climate suggest that peer mediation may be insufficient to adequately reduce the incidence of social exclusion or bullying (problems that disproportionately hurt a few lower-status students).

Punishment for violent behaviour (suspensions) were considerably reduced in CCR project schools. While Cleveland’s over-all elementary school suspension rate went up about 2%, suspension rates in the main CCR project schools went down an average of 25%. Peer mediation can provide a meaningful alternative to suspension, by resolving problems (rather than simply postponing or punishing) and by helping children prone to fighting to learn alternative ways of handling their conflicts.

The individual schools’ varied interpretations of the peer mediation program made an immense difference in the character, effectiveness, and sustainability of their conflict management initiatives. Not every school successfully implemented peer mediation. In one or two project schools, essentially no peer mediation took place, beyond the training and a few poorly-attended meetings. In another eight schools, the program did not develop much in the second year, which suggests a sustainability problem. Program advisors were essential links to the professional teaching staff, in clarifying and enhancing links between mediation, discipline, and academic work. Administrator and staff support — notably, openness to trying the program and allocating regular periods for mediators to meet — was also crucial to program success.

School staff reported improvements in self-discipline, attitude toward school, and communication skills, particularly among those they had considered to be less successful or troublesome students. Some schools were far more successful than others in keeping diverse students — especially those originally seen as ‘negative leaders’ and those with limited English — as active and confident members of the conflict management program. The most important factor was the commitment and capacity of the program advisors to coach and encourage the whole range of students, and regular/frequent mediator meetings.

In practice, mediation sessions were rarely absolutely confidential in these elementary school contexts. When program advisors in some schools insisted on being present or involved during students’ mediation sessions, program development was limited by the advisor’s scarce time and by some students’ distrust of adults. Occasionally adult monitoring seriously violated students’ confidentiality and stifled their interest in using the mediation option. However, some reliable adult support was also essential, particularly for keeping mediators with weaker skills, academic achievement, or peer popularity in the program. 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.

Student mediators sometimes unconsciously imitated traditional patterns of discipline that contradicted the principles of peer mediation. In about a third of the project sites, to varying degrees, a few mediators were telling other children how to behave and assigning blame (counseling and monitoring), rather than empowering their peers to autonomously generate resolutions to their own problems (mediating). However, wherever they were given sufficient support, respect, and opportunities to show what they could do, most of these 8-11-year-old mediators exceeded the expectations of those around them. The enthusiastic testimonials from formerly-skeptical teachers, administrators, peers, and parents indicate that young children can indeed help to build peaceful environments.
The longer and more widely a program developed in a school and the more diverse the mediator team, the more student understandings and school climate improved.

**Conclusion**

The results of this research project affirm that peer mediation, following a program model like CCR’s, can improve elementary students’ capacity and inclination to handle conflict nonviolently, their relationships with peers, and their attachment to school. Furthermore, such programs can reduce suspensions from school for violent activity and increase academic engagement and achievement. At the same time, good training is not enough: school-based program development, and support to build equitable programs that can grow and last over time, requires strengthened commitment and clarity of purpose.

**References and further reading**


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**Atomic Café**

An exclusive café
its 1950s decor
shabby
but unchanged
now trendy again

A dim-lit room
with just one table
and only five chairs
occupied by a small
yet steady clientele

Many lining up outside
wanting to join in
kept out by the five
not wishing to share
their cake

A commotion outside
then two squeezed in
but no one offers them a seat
not wishing to share
the table

even if the two
bring their own
yellow cake

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**Visiting My Brother the Farmer**

A neighbour brought over a walnut tree
un-wanted shooting among his neat rows -
apples, pears and plums, enough for summer.
My brother who, nowadays, mostly seeks out
a sunny verandah spot, a cushioned chair
is famous still, for his green thumb.
We spade the loamy soil, rich with worm
and years of folded -in autumn straw.
On this afternoon, with green light running
you’d think a warm start for
the frail stalk, small and perfect leaves.

But, when supper’s done my brother
remembers chances of frost.
Tenderly, he blankets the young thing
with hessian strips, spreads newspaper
where earth covers root.

Standing at his side, I watch
late birds fly home, across the rising moon
and am sad thinking of how, living in cities
I have missed so many moons.
But my brother, content that all’s well
says only seven years until
we’re breaking open the first nut
shouldn’t be too long for you and me.

RUDOLPH VON SCHEVEN

NICOLA KNOX