Effect of peer mediation program on short-term suspensions

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Effect of a peer mediation program on short-term suspensions

Master’s Thesis/Project

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Of the School Psychology Program

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By

Alison R. Sharp

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
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Abstract

Peer mediation has been proposed as a means to reduce violence within our schools and improve conflict resolution skills. In this study, peer mediation’s effect on short-term suspensions for fighting, both aggregate and individual, was examined. Qualitative data was gathered from student mediators in one school to assess their views of and experiences with mediation. Records kept by two mediation programs were analyzed as well. The number of short-term suspensions for fighting in four urban middle schools was analyzed for 62 middle school students given short-term suspensions for fighting and subsequently mediated within the 1996-97 school year. Significant reductions in overall short-term suspension rates were found for three of the four schools. Using a paired t-test, no significant effect for mediation was found for individual short-term suspensions.
Effect of a Peer Mediation Program on Short-term Suspensions

Introduction

School violence has become an ever increasing source of concern in American society. A recent dramatic increase in media accounts of violence and death highlights the importance of this issue (O'Donogue, 1995). Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley reports that each year about three million thefts or violent crimes occur on, or near, school campuses. This averages out to 16,000 incidents daily (Hechinger, 1994). According to a survey performed by the National Centers for Disease Control in 1991, incidents of school violence have increased dramatically, followed closely by the increase in possession of weapons inside our nation's schools. This survey found that one in five American high school students carries a weapon of some type, with this number rising to one in three when only boys are considered (O'Donogue, 1995). In New York City in 1987, 118 children under 16 were charged with possession of a gun. This number continues to rise, with 351 students being charged with gun possession in 1988 and 750 students charged in 1991 (Treaster & Tabor, 1992). The New York City Public School system experienced a doubling in gun related incidents from the 1989-1990 school year to the 1991-1992 school year, according to Edward Muir, Director of School Safety for the United Federation of Teachers (Treaster & Tabor, 1992). Hranitz and Eddowes (1990) cite a National School Safety Center Report which reported that close to 8% of students attending secondary school in urban areas had missed one or more days of school due to fear of attending. This problem with violence and crime is not confined to schools in inner city or poverty-stricken areas, but is instead an issue across America (U.S. Department of Justice, 1991). The definition of violence should be widened to include incidents that are not always counted as violence, but are detrimental to our school educational climate such as minor thefts, insults, verbal harassment and threats (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Such smaller incidents that remain unchecked and are allowed to escalate often result in more serious incidents (Marshall, 1987).
These statistics on violence in our school show that it is imperative to find a successful means of resolving minor conflicts before they escalate into larger, more serious incidents. Regulus (1995) reports that the likelihood of violence within a school system decreases when non-violent means of conflict resolution such as peer-mediation or peer counseling are available to students, and known to them. Teaching of conflict resolution skills to students has been purported as one way to facilitate conflict resolution in schools (Benson & Benson, 1993; Burrel & Vogl, 1990; Hechinger, 1994; Heller, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Morse & Andrea, 1996; Rousch & Hall, 1993; and Schrumpf, 1994). Possession of these conflict resolution skills provides students with more ways to resolve a conflict than fighting, or avoiding the situation all together (Morse & Andrea, 1994). This training can be especially valuable when initiated with young children, so that they will grow up with experience in making peace and resolving problems peacefully (Marshall, 1987). VanSlyck and Stern (1991) believe that non-violent problem solving taught early will decrease the likelihood of children becoming violent members of society. Conflict resolution skills may be taught as part of a school curriculum, or as a separate course taught to those who will be involved in conflict resolution as peer mediators (Graham, 1987). In order to understand the potential benefits of peer mediation as a means of conflict resolution, it is important to first have a conceptual understanding of conflict.

Perceptions of Conflict

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (1983, p 383) defines conflict as 1) a fight; battle; struggle, 2) sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests, ideas, etc., 3) emotional disturbance resulting from a clash of interests within the person.

As demonstrated by the above definition, conflict is generally seen in a negative light. When Sadalla, Holmberg and Halligan (1990) asked children what conflict meant to them, anger, hostility, hate and violence were the most common responses. These views have been influenced by peer interactions, religion, culture, parents and the media (Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990). Although perceptions of conflict are predominantly negative (Sadalla,
Holmberg & Halligan, 1990), conflict can also be seen as a "normal and positive force that can accompany personal growth and social change" (Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991 p. 1). Conflict can provide an opportunity to learn more effective ways of dealing with problems, improve and maintain better relationships, increase knowledge for use in conflict situations, and to learn more about ourselves and others, including important cultural differences (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

According to Johnson and Johnson (1991), there are four types of conflict, the first being developmental, which involves incompatible activities between adult and child. The second is conflict of interests, occurring when "the actions of one person attempting to maximize his or her wants or benefits, prevent, block or interfere with another person maximizing his or her wants or benefits" (I:7). Controversy is the third type of conflict and is the result of an incompatibility between one person's ideas, theories and opinions and those of another, and their seeking to reach an agreement. The fourth type of conflict is conceptual conflict, which occurs when "incompatible ideas exist simultaneously in a person's mind, or when information received does not seem to fit into what one already knows." (I:7)

Unsuccessfully resolved conflicts can result in a number of undesirable consequences, including hurt feelings, lost friendships, increased anger and frustration, and sometimes physical violence, unfortunately including death (Shrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991). The energy involved in unresolved conflicts takes away from energy to devote to learning, which is a vital part of schooling (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Valuable staff time is taken up with discipline and conflict resolution (Graham & Cline, 1989; Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990). In addition, the school climate can be damaged by unsuccessfully resolved conflicts which result in absenteeism, vandalism and violence (Shrumpf, 1994).

Often cultural differences cause conflict and misunderstandings due to lack of shared conflict management procedures (Johnson, Johnson & Dudley, 1992). Preconceived notions and suspicion of persons from differing racial, ethnic, cultural and economic groups may be present as well (Johnson & Reed, 1996). Interpersonal conflict is often rooted in differences between
ways of seeing the world, values and goals, and communication styles. Differing life experiences may increase the likelihood of conflicts as well (Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990).

According to Johnson & Johnson (1991), there are five basic strategies to resolve conflicts. The first of these is withdrawal. Withdrawal involves one party choosing to avoid the situation by giving up their original goals as well as the relationship with the other party, choosing instead to avoid the issue. Forcing is another strategy used to resolve conflicts. This involves one party in a conflict resolving to meet their goals at any costs, regardless of potential damage to the relationship. Another basic conflict strategy mentioned by Johnson and Johnson (1991) is smoothing, where one party involved in the conflict gives up their goals is order to preserve the relationship with the other party. This is also known more simply as "giving in." Another conflict resolution strategy is compromising, which involves each party relinquishing part of their goals and part of the relationship in order to reach an agreement. The last strategy mentioned by Johnson and Johnson (1991) is confrontation, in which both parties negotiate with the intention of each person having their goals met, and maintaining the relationship without any ill effects. Johnson and Johnson (1991) feel that the most successful conflict resolution results when a combination of these strategies is used according to the situation.

Formal Dispute Resolution Strategies

For people who are unable to resolve their conflicts among themselves, outside intervention may be required. One such option is police intervention and subsequent involvement in the legal system through lawsuits or court appearances (Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990). This option places emphasis on punishment of the offender and immediate resolution of the problem, rather than constructive solutions to prevent recurrence of the problem (Marshall, 1987). No provision is made to facilitate positive change within the offender to prevent the recurrence of the situation that first led them into contact with the legal system (Marshall, 1987). Serious crimes often follow a lifetime of less serious offenses and misbehavior, and are a result of well-established behavior patterns; they might have been proactively dealt with earlier in the person's life (Marshall, 1987). In addition, legal solutions to
problems can be inefficient, as well as expensive (Graham & Cline, 1989). Another dispute resolution option that involves the court system is arbitration, which will be discussed next.

In arbitration, an impartial third party makes a decision that is binding for those involved in the conflict (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Generally, although a decision is reached, one person is seen as winning and the other as losing. One or both of the parties involved is often left with a feeling of disappointment, anger or resentment at the outcome of the conflict (Morse & Andrea, 1996). An additional disadvantage of this approach is a lack of opportunity to develop useful conflict resolution skills to be used in future disagreements (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). In the search for a better way to deal with conflict, increasing attention is being given to the option of mediation (Graham & Cline, 1989).

Unlike arbitration, mediation provides the opportunity for disputants to develop skills that may be used throughout their lives, as well being empowered by being able to resolve their own conflicts with the help of a mediator (Burrel & Vogl, 1990; Hanson, 1994). Mediation is "an intervention by a neutral and impartial third party who does not, like a judge, weigh up the evidence and impose a settlement, but assists the parties in discussing their problem peacefully and constructively and in coming to their own agreement" (Marshall, 1987, p. 34). Participation in this process is voluntary, with the desired outcome being a resolution acceptable to each of the parties involved (Benson & Benson, 1993). The types of conflicts handled by mediation include neighborhood disputes, assault cases, small claims, labor disputes, divorce and custody cases and interpersonal conflicts in schools (Kessell & Pruitt, 1989). Mediation has become increasingly popular in schools at all levels through recent years as a potential means of resolving conflict among students (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Maxwell, 1989; Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). Mediation is preferable to arbitration in that agreements are mutually reached, rather than imposed by an outside party, leading to less resentment of the co-disputant, and greater feelings of personal effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). There is also a greater likelihood that a resolution reached through mediation will hold than will a resolution declared through arbitration, as the mediation process reaches underlying issues that arbitration may not (Johnson
Successful mediation can result in improved relationships between participants, and through participation in the mediation, valuable skills gained in negotiating and communicating that they will be able to use independently in the future (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). An additional positive outcome of mediation is the empowerment of the participants to solve their own problems (Benson & Benson, 1993; and Rousch & Hall, 1993).

Peer mediation is the use of mediation within a school to resolve conflicts among students, utilizing fellow students who are trained in the mediation process. The peer mediator is used to "facilitate the process of communication and problem solving that leads to resolution" (Shrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991, p.1). The students involved in the dispute engage in productive decision making themselves, rather than having an outside party decide for them what resolution to the problem is most appropriate (Maxwell, 1989). It can be explained as a chance to sit and talk uninterrupted, so each side of the dispute is heard. After the problem is defined, solutions are created, then evaluated. When an agreement is reached, it is written and signed. Peer mediation is most commonly used in conjunction with traditional disciplinary approaches, such as suspension or expulsion for more serious incidents, such as the use of drugs or weapons, and for serious violent offenses (Maxwell, 1989). It is generally used for conflicts arising between students, rather than between students and teachers, or other school professionals (Graham & Cline, 1989). Students trained in mediation can often solve problems among students more efficiently than can teachers (Graham & Cline, 1989). Participation in peer mediation has many benefits for students within the school, which will now be discussed.

Through participation in peer mediation programs, students are reported to gain important life skills such as self-control, communication, problem solving, critical thinking and planning, all of which are used in the mediation process (Morse & Andrea, 1994; Schrumpf, 1994; Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1990). These skills can be used in a variety of conflicts (Burrell & Vogl, 1990). A greater feeling of control over life situations has been reported as a benefit for students who participate in peer mediation programs (Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991). This empowerment occurs as students make their own decisions of how to best resolve
their conflicts and learn from the experience, rather than having an adult make the decisions for them (Burrell & Vogl, 1990). In order to provide a better understanding of the potential of peer mediation as a valid means of resolving conflict, the process of mediation will be discussed next.

The Mediation Process:

The following description of the mediation process is drawn from the work of Schrumpf (1994). There are six steps in the mediation process. During the first step, which is known as opening the session, introductions are made and the ground rules are explained. These include mediator neutrality, confidentiality, no interrupting and agreement to solve the conflict. The mediator obtains a commitment to the ground rules before proceeding. During the second step, information is gathered. Each person has the opportunity to express their view of what happened while the mediator and the other disputant listen. The mediator listens, clarifies with questions and summarizes. This step is repeated until the problem is understood. During the third step, the mediator focuses on the interests of the disputants. This also includes determining what interests are held in common, and summarizing these shared interests. The fourth step, referred to as creating options, involves the disputants brainstorming possible solutions, and the mediator asking disputants "What can be done to resolve the problem?" The fifth step involves evaluating options and deciding what can be done to resolve the problem. A solution is reached by asking each person what they are willing to do and agreeing on a solution. The sixth step is writing an agreement and closing the mediation.

Referral to Mediation:

Students can be referred to mediation in a variety of ways when they experience conflicts. In some cases, students may refer themselves to mediation when they experience a conflict with another student, or they may be referred by school professionals, such as teachers, administrators, and other members of the faculty (Schrumpf, 1994; Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1990). Applications requesting peer mediation can be completed by students involved in a conflict (Burrell & Vogl, 1990). Some schools have a policy of mandating participation in mediation following "student-to-student physical altercations or serious verbal altercations"
In others, mediators work in pairs during unstructured times such as playtime and lunch when conflicts often occur, and offer assistance to those who appear to be having a conflict (Rousch & Hall, 1993). Careful selection of the students who will mediate is important, as they are a vital part of making this process successful. Some ways in which they may be selected will be discussed next.

**Selection of Mediators**

There are a number of acceptable ways to select students to be mediators. All students can be taught constructive conflict resolution skills (known as the whole student body approach) or a select number of students can be trained to mediate, which is known as the cadre approach (Johnson & Johnson; 1995). Schrumpf, Crawford and Usadel (1991) advocate self-nomination of students to be peer mediators, with teachers and program staff making the final selection of students. Sadalla, Holmberg and Halligan (1990) recommend that students be peer nominated, and then approved by teachers. Benson and Benson (1990) advocate this approach, and recommend that the students who receive the highest number of peer nominations be selected to be trained as mediators. VanSlyck and Stern (1991) feel that peer mediators representative of the student body should be selected, including students of all academic levels, and positive and negative role models. Sadalla, Holmberg and Halligan (1990) add that students should be selected to be representative of the student body by race and gender. Burrell and Vogl (1991) also emphasize that a group of mediators representative of the school population would be ideal. They cite a study in Illinois where some schools asked for volunteers, and others acquired mediators by teacher and student recommendation. The final decision on selection was made by school officials based on the nominee's interpersonal skills such as good listening ability, communication skills, and a sense of humor. Next, some possible characteristics of schools without peer mediation programs will be highlighted below.

**Schools Without Peer Mediation Programs:**

In schools without peer mediation programs, students often handle their conflicts by referring them to their teachers (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).
Acikgoz (1994), while conducting a study in an elementary school without a peer mediation program, found that 50% of all student conflicts (which were frequent) were brought to the attention of the teacher. When conflicts are not referred to teachers, they are often handled through more destructive and ineffective ways (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz, 1994). Among these are verbal attacks or aggression (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz, 1994; Shrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991), getting even (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz, 1994), spreading rumors (Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991), using physical force (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz; 1994, Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel; 1991), threatening (Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991), withdrawal from the conflict or ignoring the situation or other person involved (Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991), giving in (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz, 1994) or continuing to hold a grudge (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). A student's choice of conflict resolution often comes from television and the movies, where violence is an acceptable alternative (Johnson, Johnson & Dudley, 1992). Many students do not have the skills to manage conflict constructively (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Acikgoz, 1994).

When a school does have a peer mediation process in place, the outcomes of conflict can be quite different. The following section will discuss some of the anecdotal data highlighting the success of peer mediation programs in assisting students to more appropriately manage conflicts.

**Success of Peer Mediation Programs:**

There has been much anecdotal evidence pointing to the success of peer mediation programs in promoting successful conflict resolution in schools. Data has been gathered that highlights the positive effects for students that function as mediators (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Rousch & Hall, 1993). Sadalla, Holmberg and Halligan (1990) cite increased leadership abilities as well as increased grades. Increased self-esteem is mentioned as an outcome of participation as a mediator (Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Rousch & Hall, 1993; Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990). Through their training and work as mediators, student mediators gain the knowledge of how to deflate small conflicts before they escalate (Peart, 1994). Decrease in the disruptive
behavior of students previously known as "troublemakers" has been noted as well (Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Rousch & Hall, 1993).

Among the improvements credited to peer mediation programs are an improved school environment (Morse & Andrea, 1994; Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990), increased student responsibility for their own behavior (Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991; Schrumpf, 1994) and less teacher and administrator time spent in conflict resolution (Benson & Benson, 1993; Morse & Andrea, 1994; Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Schrumpf, 1994). Less fighting and disruptive behavior were cited as an outcome by Vogl and Burrell (1990). In addition, peer mediation programs promote peace and understanding of individual cultural differences (Schrumpf, 1994), which prepares participants to live in a multicultural world through its emphasis on listening to alternate points of view, and peacefully resolving differences. An additional benefit cited by Schrumpf, Crawford and Usadel (1990) is a reframing within the school system of conflict as an opportunity to learn. Next, the empirical evidence supporting the success of peer mediation will be discussed.

Empirical Support for Peer Mediation

In some cases, the above benefits of peer mediation have been supported by empirical data, although to an inadequate extent (Van Slyck & Stern, 1991; Powell, Muir-McClain, & Halasyamani, 1995). Further empirical data collection is necessary to determine whether these conflict resolution/peer mediation programs are an effective tool for reducing violence and increasing conflict resolution skills (Powell, Muir-McClain & Halasyamani, 1995).

The anecdotal assumption that peer mediation programs reduce teacher and administrator time spent in conflicts is supported by analysis of a peer mediation program implemented by Johnson and Johnson (1994). An 80% reduction was found in the number of conflicts dealt with by teachers, and referrals to the principal were completely eliminated. When a conflict resolution/peer mediation program was implemented in a middle school in Orange County, North Carolina, a significant reduction in disciplinary problems was found (Powell, Muir-McClain & Halasyamani, 1995). Three-hundred ninety-one Sixth Grade students were
trained using a conflict resolution model, with 26 students peer-nominated to serve as mediators. These mediators underwent further training which included role plays, videos and games that increased their knowledge of conflict resolution. There was an 82% drop in the number of disciplinary referrals during the year that the program was implemented. In addition, there was an 82% reduction of in-school suspension of 6th grade students, as well as a 97% reduction in out-of-school suspensions. A variety of factors may have influenced these school-wide improvements, however, the evaluators concluded that it was likely that the program had been beneficial. One New York Middle School found a 16.7% reduction in reported incidents of fighting within a year after a peer mediation program was implemented (Van Slyck & Stern; 1991). Walt Whitman School in Brooklyn experienced a 10% reduction in suspensions during the first year peer mediation was implemented. The number of suspensions fell further during the second year of the program. Other forms of conflict resolution were emphasized at that time as well, making the influence of the peer mediation program less clear (Nor, Tait, & Winfeld; 1996).

In addition to these systems level improvements as a result of peer mediation, there is evidence that suggests improvement in interpersonal skills. Johnson and Johnson (1994) measured students' absorption of conflict resolution/mediation techniques by videotaping their mediation of two conflicts, as well as presenting them with two conflict situations and asking them to write the appropriate responses. The students demonstrated that they knew and were able to apply the negotiation procedures after training. Johnson, Johnson and Dudley (1992) trained students in conflict resolution procedures, and found that even after four to five months, these students were more likely to use negotiation procedures than were untrained students. Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward and Magnuson (1995) found similar results. In the program they evaluated, four classrooms in a suburban, middle-class Midwestern elementary school were selected to receive training in conflict resolution. Ninety-two students in grades ranging from 3rd through 6th received 30 minutes of training daily for a six week period, focusing on mediation and negotiation training and skills. It had been reported by teachers prior to the
training that conflicts frequently occurred, and resulted in requests for arbitration by the teacher, or by ineffective strategies that led to a worsening of the conflict. The training was shown to be effective in teaching the students the procedures and skills involved in negotiation and mediation. The students were able to transfer these skills to real-life conflicts with their classmates. These skills were retained by the students, who were observed to have continued using them 4 months after the conclusion of training.

Similar results were found in the Mountain Home Pilot Project (Rousch & Hall; 1993). Students in the elementary and junior high school in the Mountain Home School District in Idaho were exposed to three part program designed to reduce conflict within the school system. The first part was a conflict resolution course taught to the 3rd through 5th grade students. The second was an elective conflict resolution course that could be taken at the junior high level. The third part was the training of elementary students as mediators to be used on the playground. The elementary students possessed significantly more conflict resolution skills after taking the conflict resolution course. In addition, the number of misconduct slips issued for misbehavior dropped after student mediators began to patrol the playground.

Evidence pointing to the success of peer mediation in resolving conflicts has been collected as well. Johnson and Johnson (1991) found a high amount of successful resolutions of conflicts in a peer mediation program implemented in a middle school in Racine, Wisconsin. One-hundred eighty-nine disputes were mediated in the first 6 months of the program, with 186 of the mediations leading to resolutions that lasted between disputants. Similar results were found by Hanson (1994) who reported that more than 80% of the conflicts mediated in a Dade County Florida peer mediation program were successfully and permanently resolved in one session. In an inner-city, predominantly African-American School in Baltimore, Maryland, a peer mediation/conflict resolution program was implemented that began by training the whole school in conflict mediation theory through hands on activities. Mediators were then selected through peer and teacher nomination, and trained in mediation/conflict resolution techniques. These students then patrolled the cafeteria, halls and playgrounds in pairs, wearing belts that
identified them as mediators. They then offered their services in mediating conflicts. In the two years that data was collected, 93% of the conflicts brought to peer mediation were resolved with the help of the mediator, and 93% of these resolutions lasted for the remainder of the school year (Powell, Muir-McClain & Halasyamani; 1995). In addition, data found by Van Slyck and Stern (1991) suggested that physical conflicts can sometimes be prevented by participation in mediation. Students participating in mediation from a New York middle school reported that 75% of the successfully mediated conflicts would have resulted in physical fights without the mediation.

As suggested by the above literature review, there is a dearth of empirical analysis of the successful of peer mediation programs as a conflict resolution tool. This study is intended to provide empirical evidence evaluating peer mediation as a violence prevention tool. This study will examine the effects of a peer mediation program within four middle schools in a medium sized urban district in upstate New York. The first question posed is whether implementation of a peer mediation program resulted in a reduction in short-term suspensions for fighting across the school. The second question was whether participation in peer mediation as a disputant resulted in a decrease in short-term suspension rate for individual students who participated in peer mediation.

In addition to the above research questions, anecdotal data was collected from mediators and mediation forms regarding the type of disputes mediated, the percentage of time that resolution was reached, and the percentage of time that these resolutions held.

Methods

Research Questions:

The intent of this study was to investigate whether participation in peer mediation resulted in a reduction in the number of short-term suspensions for fighting. Short-term suspension was defined as suspension from school for a period of five days or less. This information was analyzed on both an individual and an aggregate level. Anecdotal data was also
collected for students who participated in peer mediation as mediators. To this end, a survey was developed and administered to students serving as mediators within the school district. Mediation records kept by the peer mediation program at each school were analyzed as well to investigate whether the program had results similar to those found in the literature.

Hypothesis One: Implementation of a peer mediation program will result in a significant overall reduction in the total number of short-term suspensions for fighting across the school.

Hypothesis Two: Participation in peer mediation will result in a lower rate of short-term suspensions for fighting for individuals who have participated in peer mediation as disputants. This rate will decrease with each subsequent mediation.

General Demographic Characteristics:

Middle school students from Grades 6 - 8 from a medium sized urban school district in upstate New York were chosen to participate. The district serves approximately 45,000 students. Nearly 80% of these students are minorities. A majority of the population is at or below the poverty level. Participants in this study were drawn from four city middle schools.

Study 1

Independent and Dependent Variables:

The first independent variable was implementation of a peer mediation program within the school building. The dependent variable was the total number of short term suspensions for fighting by school per year.

Procedure:

Archival data collected for school year 1993-94 and 1995-96 on the four Middle Schools with peer mediation programs was analyzed to determine whether there was a reduction in short-
term suspensions for fighting as a result of initiation of the peer mediation program. All of the peer mediation programs within the school were implemented during the 1994-95 school year.

Results:

The first hypothesis was that implementation of a peer mediation program will result in a significant overall reduction in the total number of short-term suspensions for fighting across the school. The numbers were weighted to compensate for differences in the number of students enrolled in the schools for different years. School A experienced a 100% increase in short-term suspensions for fighting between the 1993-94 school year and the 1995-96 school year. School B had a 17% decrease in short-term suspensions for fighting during the same time period. There was a 32% decrease in short-term suspensions for School C, while School D had a 33% decrease in short-term suspensions for fighting.

Discussion

A significant reduction in suspensions was found for three of the four schools. This is the expected result according to the literature. This is congruent with the findings of Nor, Tait and Winfeld (1996), who found a 10% decrease in short-term suspensions during the first year of program implementation, and an additional decrease in the second year the program was running. The results found were more dramatic than those found by these authors, but less than those reported by Powell, Muir-McClain and Halasyamani (1995). The program reported in that instance had a 97% drop in out of school suspensions.

One school experienced a 100% increase in suspensions. It is unclear why this occurred. Investigation into possible causes was done, but no definitive cause was uncovered. It is difficult to link this occurrence to the implementation of the mediation program, or to anything else.

Limitations:

Although percent reduction in suspensions is an acceptable way to assess the impact of peer mediation programs, it is difficult to examine the effects of peer mediation programs in isolation. Other violence programs were at work concurrently, and although it appears that the
peer mediation programs were effective in reducing short-term suspensions for fighting, it is
difficult to determine what effect other interventions may have had. In addition, school policy
changes may have influenced the results as well.

Study 2

Independent Variable: Participation in peer mediation as a result of given a short term
suspension for fighting.

Dependent Variable: The effect of undergoing peer mediation on the rate of short term
suspensions for students who had been short-term suspended for fighting during the 1996-97
school year.

Procedure

The number of short term suspensions as a result of fighting was collected for each
student that had participated in mediation from School A and B during the 1996-97 school year.
Out of the four schools selected for this study, only two had kept records of mediation that had
taken place. The two schools that had not kept adequate data were eliminated from the sample.
The mediation records kept for School A and B were examined to determine when mediation
had taken place for a particular student. A Poisson distribution was used to calculate the rate of
short term suspensions per day for individual students before the 1st mediation, after the 1st
mediation and again after each subsequent mediation. Student data was divided into three
categories, according to what portion of the year first mediation took place. The short-term
suspension rates were analyzed for students from each group and percent reduction calculated.
The rates of suspension before and after the 1st mediation were compared using a paired t-test.

Results

School A. For the students from School A, participation in peer mediation had variable
results depending on what portion of the year the mediation took place. For students who
underwent mediation prior to January 1, 1997 (n = 30), a reduction in their short term suspension
rate was found with each subsequent mediation. The overall short term suspension rate per day
for the students (.012 short-term suspensions per day) mediated decreased by 28 % after their 1st mediation (.008 short-term suspensions per day). The short-term suspension rate decreased further after the 2nd mediation, making the suspension rate 73% lower than it was prior to the 1st mediation.

For students who underwent mediation between January 1st and March 1st, 1997 (n = 23), no effect was noted in suspension rate. The suspension rate per day before the first mediation (.0073 short-term suspensions per day) was similar to that after the first mediation (.0074 suspensions per day) and after the 2nd, actually increased slightly (.014 suspensions per day).

Similar results were found for those students who were mediated after April 1st (n= 9). Their average rate of suspensions per day prior to mediation was .0057, while it increased slightly to .008 suspensions per day after the 2nd mediation.

School B. For the students from School B, the data could not be divided by portion of the year in which the student was mediated, due to small overall sample size (n = 14). The students’ initial rate of suspension was .00133 short-term suspensions per day, while after the 1st mediation, it was .00127 short-term suspensions per day. Undergoing mediation did not appear to affect the short-term suspension rate for the students. When a paired t-test was used to compare number of suspensions per 100 days before and after first mediation for individual students, no significant difference was found. (t(60)=.45, p =.66.).

Discussion

The second hypothesis was that participation in peer mediation would result in a lower rate of short-term suspensions for fighting for individual students, and that rate would decrease with each subsequent mediation. In one school, mediation reduced the rate of short-term suspensions for only those students who were mediated in the first third of the school year. This suggests that mediation may more effectively reduce conflicts resulting in suspension when it is used earlier in the year. Anecdotal information from the literature suggests that skills gained through participation in mediation may give students improved conflict resolution skills.
Perhaps when the mediation does not take place until later in the school year, conflicts among the students have become more deeply ingrained and difficult to resolve.

An additional possibility is that students who are still being suspended in January may not be adhering to some of the classroom norms such as “no drilling during class (drilling is ritualized arguing, [e.g., insulting a peer’s mother]),” and so forth. Students who have not conformed to social expectation at that point in the year may be less receptive to learning the skills that could be learned through the mediation process.

**Limitations:**

The small sample size led to limited statistical power and ability to draw conclusions. Although it was originally intended to collect suspension data for four schools, records had only been kept for two of the four schools. Because of this, these two schools that did not collect adequate data were eliminated from the sample. For one of the schools selected, only 14 students had participated in mediation, as well as received a short-term suspension. Although the sample size was larger for the other middle school in the sample (n = 62), division of the students into three groups by first mediation date resulted in small sample size as well. There were only thirty students mediated in the 1st third of the year, twenty-three students mediated in the second third of the year, and only nine mediated in the final third of the year. With these small sample sizes, it was difficult to determine if any significant effect had occurred.

As previously mentioned, there is an insufficient amount of data on the effectiveness of peer mediation for reducing violence among individual students. This may be partially a result of the complexity of this task. In order to compare the number of suspensions before and after mediation had taken place, a way must be found to balance the amount of time that has passed before an individual’s first mediation. A Poisson distribution was used because it removed the influence of time, however, calculating the rate per day resulted in extremely small numbers. When these small numbers were analyzed using a paired-t test, no significant difference was found.
It may also have been that the experience of being suspended may have aversive to some students, resulting in only one suspension for them.

Study 3

Procedure:

The peer mediation coordinator for each school was asked to have the students serving as mediators in his or her school complete a peer mediators survey that assessed their views on peer mediation and return it to the School Safety Coordinator. Twenty-five from School A (peer mediators during the 1997-1998 school year) completed a survey. No surveys were returned from the other three schools.

Instrumentation:

Survey for mediators

This survey (Please see Appendix A for survey) was developed collaboratively by the author, the School Safety Coordinator for the school district, and a Program Evaluator. Questions were developed addressing common benefits and problems with peer mediation noted in the literature. The survey assessed the peer mediators’ feelings about the program's efficacy. It also evaluated their experiences as peer mediators, including their perceptions of peer mediation's effect on school climate, what is involved in a successful mediation, its varying effectiveness for differing ethnic/cultural groups, and what types of conflicts are most commonly brought to mediation

Discussion:

Previous Participation in Mediation:

Almost half of the mediators (12) had previously participated in mediation as disputants. Nine of the survey participants had been mediators in elementary school and decided to continue. Three of the students decided to become mediators after hearing about the program, and the remaining seven became mediators after being recommended/asked to, by school staff. One additional student was peer-nominated.
Recruitment methods for mediators were similar to those found in the literature. Methods for mediator selection in the literature included self-nomination and peer nomination (Benson & Benson, 1990; Sadalla, Holmberg & Halligan, 1990; Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1991; VanSlyck & Stern, 1991).

**Perceptions of Effectiveness:**

All mediators surveyed felt that the mediation was effective for disputants who participated, and that some, or most of the agreements held. This is in agreement with the current literature on the success of mediation in resolving conflicts. Successful resolution rates reported ranged from 80 to 90% (Hanson; 1994, Johnson & Johnson; 1991, Powell, Muir-McClain & Halasyamani; 1995).

**Types of Disputes Mediated:**

The types of disputes mediated included fights, arguments, misunderstandings, rumors, gossiping, relationship issues, ruining things, and name calling. When asked which types of disputes were most commonly mediated, ten mediators reported that disputes involving rumors were the most common, while seven stated that fights were the most common reason for mediation. The remaining eight mediators cited a variety of disputes, such as fights and arguing, name-calling, fights and rumors. The rumors were most frequently of the “he said, she said” variety.

**Skills Leading to Successful Mediation**

The mediators provided a variety of answers when asked what they did that lead to a successful mediation. Some of the more common answers included: (a) letting them know I am only there to help, (b) being a good role model and acting peacefully, (c) setting the mediation groundrules, (d) being respectful (discussing options and having them explain the other person’s feelings, (e) cracking a joke and using the humor as a common ground, (f) telling disputants about myself, and (g) trying to stay calm even when people were rude.

Other comments included:

- making the disputants feel comfortable
• making sure each person understands how the other feels about the situation
• having the disputants develop solutions
• good training and practice
• giving advice for possible solutions
• congratulating the disputants, thanking them for coming and not taking sides
• trying to help, asking questions and giving intelligent answers
• talking things over
• making the disputants feel welcome
• saying “We’ll never get the problem solved by arguing.”
• asking “What do you want from each other, and if you get what you want, do you think it will solve the problem?”
• talking to the disputants the way that you would talk to friends

Many of the above statements reflect the mediation process described by Schrumpf (1994). Only one student suggested giving the disputants solutions, which is not recommended in the literature.

Agreements that did not hold:

When the students were asked “In instances where the agreements didn’t hold, why not?,” five students replied that all their agreements held. One of these students replied “I have never mediated a mediation where the agreement didn’t hold, but if it happened, I would have to say that the mediators could have missed something or not asked a certain question that would change everything.” Three of the mediators felt that disputants’ friends who had not undergone the mediation carried on the disagreement, regardless of whether a solution had been reached. Five mediators blamed lack of commitment to successfully finding a solution. Personal dislike of the disputants for each other was cited by two mediators. Other reasons cited included lack of self-control, the relationship being too badly damaged, and the students forgetting the solution reached during mediation.
This survey showed success of mediations similar to that described by Hanson (1994) who described a 80% success rate of mediation, and Powell, Muir-McClain and Halasyamani (1995) who reported a 93% success rate.

**Improvement of School Climate:**

When asked to note what improvements in the school climate were the result of peer mediation, seven students cited reduced fighting. Another two mentioned that students who had almost fought had undergone mediation, which averted the fight, resulted in reduced excitement about fighting within the school. Rumor reduction was mentioned by two mediators, while two other mediators felt that people became more friendly with each other. Three more mediators thought that people were behaving better, which encouraged improvement of others' behavior as well.

The above responses regarding improved relationships between participants is congruent with that discussed by Johnson and Johnson (1991). Prevention of potential fights is also mentioned as a benefit by Van Slyck and Stern (1991). In that study, students interviewed felt that 73% of successful mediations were instrumental in heading off a physical conflict. Nine of the mediators interviewed for this study felt that mediation resulted in improvement in school climate by reducing the number of fights, or heading off fights through a more acceptable means of conflict resolution.

**Differential effects:**

The majority of students felt that there was no difference in effectiveness according to race, gender or ethnicity. No mention of an effect had been mentioned by the literature, however, a suggestion had been made in the literature that mediation might be a way to reduce misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

**Mediator's perceptions of the most effective violence prevention strategies**

According to the mediators, the other most effective violence prevention strategies include: Conflict Resolution Room (which is most often used to resolve teacher/student conflicts), being sent to the house administrator, student court, talking with a counselor, bringing
the students’ parents in for a meeting, sentries, metal detector, in-school suspension and after school activities.

When asked to name the least effective violence prevention strategy, the strategy mentioned most often by the mediators was suspension. Regarding suspension, one student said “All the kids who get into fights feel it’s like vacation.” Another stated “Suspensions [are the most common, but they don’t work] because, students like to be out of school, no matter what the reason is. So when they come back, they still haven’t learned. Because if a student lives at home with violence, then he is going to be used to fighting. That’s nothing that the school can change, unless he decides that he wants not to be a fighting individual.” Other strategies that the students felt were ineffective included: teachers trying to break up fights, going to Conflict Resolution Room, meeting with a counselor, and films and movies about appropriate conflict resolution strategies.

As can be seen from the above responses, there are no clear indicators of effectiveness of the different strategies. Many violence prevention strategies were cited as both the most and least effective.

Insight or Skills Gained by Participating in Peer Mediation:

Out of 25 students surveyed, 12 felt that students had gained skills or insight from participating in peer mediation. Positive effects of mediation cited included increased self-esteem, more respect for others, increased understanding of others’ feelings, improved relationships with the co-disputant and less desire to fight. One mediator mentioned witnessing an incident in which a student became less likely to “jump to conclusions” after undergoing mediation. Four did not feel that skills or insight were gained, although two indicated that the agreements held regardless. Nine students answered in a way that did not address the question asked.

According to the literature, through participation in peer mediation programs, students are reported to gain important life skills such as self-control, communication, problem solving,
critical thinking and planning (Morse & Andrea, 1994; Schrumpf, 1994; Schrumpf, Crawford & Usadel, 1990).

Additional Comments:

When students were given an opportunity to provide additional comments, responses concerning the peer mediation program were overwhelmingly positive. This is not surprising, as participants could logically be expected to see the program positively. One student stated that “I think peer mediation should be at every school so it would give kids better problem solving skills and less suspensions. This is a great program.” Another student stated, “Basically, what mediation is based on [is] ... [coming] to a way to solve [problems].” Additional comments included: “Mediation has worked for I’d say 99% of the school. I like it. It’s good.” and “I think more people should pay attention and not do the wrong things.” Another student said “I think that peer mediation is a wonderful strategy to help solve your problems, because you can communicate with other students your own age.”

Limitations:

Despite numerous attempts to increase response rate, few surveys were returned. Out of 125 surveys distributed, 25 surveys were returned. This likely led to sample bias. It may have been that the students who took the time to complete the survey were the ones who felt the most positively about peer mediation. Perhaps if students who had undergone mediation as disputants were interviewed, the results would have been different.

Although most questions in the survey appeared to be clear and easily understandable, there appeared to be one question that was not developmentally appropriate for those children completing the survey. Almost half of the students appeared not to understand the question well enough answer the question. The question was as follows “Give examples of where you have seen students gain skills or insight through participation in mediation.” It should have been worded more like “What do you think that students have learned through going through mediation?”
Study 4

Procedure

Although four schools had mediation programs, mediation records for the 1996-97 school year had only been kept by two of the schools. The schools without adequate records were eliminated from the sample. The mediation records kept by the two schools were analyzed to determine what types of conflicts were mediated, and whether or not a resolution was reached for each conflict..

School A:

There were 213 mediations at School A during the 1997-1998 school year. Out of these mediations, 42 involved fighting (19%), 33 almost fighting (15%), 28 involved name calling (13%), and 35 involved rumors (16%). Additional reasons for mediation included playing in hall, confrontation, pushing, harassment, sexual harassment, playing, food fight, confrontation, playing rough and calling home. Out of the 213 mediations, 102 involved some type of physical contact between disputants (48%). Out of all mediations, 210 (98%) were resolved in one session. Partial consent was reached in two additional mediations. In two cases, agreements were reached but broken the next day.

School B

During the 1996-97 school year, 35 mediations took place at School B. A form was completed for each mediation (Appendix B). Agreement was reached in each of these mediations. Three additional cases were referred for mediation, but they never took place, due to either student absences, or resolution of the conflict prior to the scheduled mediation. Fighting was the stated cause of 13.57% of these mediations, which was the same number as that of almost fighting. In four cases, the type of dispute was not indicated. Other reasons for mediations included rumors, talking behind back, teasing, crying, verbal abuse, arguing, drilling, picking on each other, and conflict.

Discussion:
As previously mentioned, the findings regarding successful mediations of conflict were similar to those reported by Powell, Muir-McClain and Halasyamani (1996) and Hanson (1994).

**Implications:**

Peer mediation programs appear to be useful in reducing suspensions in schools on an aggregate level, and for students mediated within a certain portion of the year. Students who function as mediators note many positive outcomes of the mediation program in their school, ranging from less fighting to increased communication between students. This decrease in suspensions could result in increased instructional time, both in the increased time spent in the classroom by students, and the time spent by teachers instructing, rather than settling disputes between students.

The literature shows that there are numerous potential social and emotional benefits for students involved in peer mediation, both as mediators and disputants. These proposed benefits include increased self-esteem, empowerment and a greater feeling of control over life situations.

School psychologists and other professionals within the school building often work with students with social and emotional difficulties. The practice gained in conflict resolution skills through the mediation process could be especially valuable in assisting them to gain social skills. Johnson, Johnson and Dudley (1992) and Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward and Magnuson (1994) found that conflict resolution skills were retained and generalizable to real life situations.

When children are given the opportunity to resolve their own differences rather than having resolutions imposed on them by others, the opportunity for personal growth is maximized.
References


For the above citation, I don't believe that it is published, but I'm not sure. Could you take a look at the attached front page and tell me what you think?


Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.


the impact of peer mediation programs. In K. Grover Duffy, J.W. Grosch, & P.V. Olczak (Eds.),
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Appendix A

PEER MEDIATORS SURVEY, 1998

For the 1997-98 school year, a top priority for the district is to find out what works for our peer mediation program. Your experience and beliefs are important to us; your comments can help us to improve this program. Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey. We will report to you the results later this school year. Thank you for your time.

Your school: ______________________

1. How did you become a peer mediator? Please give a very brief description.

2. Before you became a peer mediator, did you have any experience with peer mediation as a disputant? (Check all that apply.) _______ Elementary _______ Middle

3. In your experience, what are the things you say or do that lead to a successful mediation?

4. (a) What types of conflicts have you mediated?
   
   (b) Which are the most common?

5. (a) Do you believe that peer mediation worked for the students whose disputes you have mediated?
   
   (b) In your professional judgment, why did the agreements hold?

   (c) In instances where the agreements did not hold, why not?

6. Please give examples of where you have witnessed other students gaining skills or insight by participating in peer mediation.

7. Do you see different ways working for different students? In other words, do different strategies work for different genders or ethnic groups of students? If so, please give some examples.

8. What examples can you give of peer mediation improving the climate of your school?

9. Aside from peer mediation, what do you believe have been the most effective violence-prevention strategies that you school has used and why?

10. What do you think have been the least effective violence prevention strategies, and why?

11. Additional comments:

    Thank you for your time. Please return this form to xxxxx.

Name (optional): ______________________
Appendix B

Sample Peer Mediation Form

PEER MEDIATION  Date:____________________

Please fill out the top section and return it to the Peer Mediation Mailbox or the Peer Mediation Room (106). The Peer Mediation extension is 1061, please leave a message if no one is in the office.

_____________________________  ______________________________
Student’s name and homebase  Student’s name and homebase

_____________________________  ______________________________
Student’s name and homebase  Student’s name and homebase

_____________________________
Student’s name and homebase

Students appear to need mediation because:____________________________________

Have all disputants agreed to be mediated?   Yes_______  No________

Peer mediation may be used instead of:  _ OSS__Being sent home _____Detention_____Other

Referred by: ____________________  House Administrator: ________________

******************************************************************************************

Date: __________  Session Began: __________  Session Ended: __________

AGREEMENT

We the undersigned, having participated in a mediation session on this date and being satisfied that the provisions of the resolution of our dispute are fair and reasonable, hereby agree to abide by and fulfill the following:

Students:  Peer Mediators:

_________________________  ____________________________
_________________________  ____________________________
_________________________

Adult Staff:  Case #:

_________________________  __________