

Peer mediation: conflict as an opportunity of change

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To have conflicts is human

To resolve them, divine

Abstract: Conflict is a normal, natural part of everyday life, the legitimate outcome of interactions between even the most well meaning individuals. From our first moments of life to our last, humans beings are continually involved in conflicts. We conflict over mundane inanities as well as the most pressing issues of the times. No aspect of life is resistant to becoming the focus of human conflict. Conflict is not only a normal part of living, it is also a necessary part. It is through the friction of forces in opposition that things change. Fields as diverse as political science, biology, physics, and religion all view conflict as a source of potentially positive change and growth. It also plays an especially significant role in human psychological development. The conflicts that we face in our lives shape our characters, our cultures, and our world. But conflicts are not always positive. Most of the ideas free-associated with the word “conflict” are decidedly negative (fighting, pain, violence) and, on an emotional level, people can feel unloved, angry and depressed as a result of conflicts. Certainly, then, conflict can have destructive as well as constructive consequences.

Keywords: conflict, opportunity, mediation, school, education, behaviour

Students have always become involved in conflicts. But today, young people disagree with each other more often and over issues of less real consequence than in the past. The media shows us a vision of aggression arousal in schools; teachers complain about lost of authority; and families expect schools to be the place where the youngest are educated in a safety environment.

In this context we should ask an important question: are schools prepared to deal with interpersonal conflicts? Everyone brings up the issue of aggression and bullying, however, interpersonal conflicts assume a wide range of behaviors: verbal threats, cursing, name calling, insults, racial slurs, pushing, grabbing, shoving, punching, kicking and fighting. These are commonplaces in many schools, interfering with schools climate and ultimately with learning environments, causing fear and absenteeism, not only among students but also among teachers as a response to stress.

Schools have attempted to manage interpersonal conflicts among students, teachers and administrators by various models of discipline, such as referrals, suspension or expulsion. However, the traditional punitive response has already shown its incapacity to produce real behavior changes or even to reduce interpersonal conflicts in school context (Smith, Daunic, Miller & Robinson, 2002). Dissatisfaction with traditional processes established to settle disputes has led educators and others to try new ways of conflict resolution such as mediation. Peer mediation represents a move away from programs that depend on punitive and exclusion methods of behavior control. These methods cause stigma and discrimination and don't give a systemic response to the problem.

The rush towards conflict resolution in the schools is mirrored in society at large by a move away from the traditional litigation model of problem solving in the courts. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) efforts, including court-based mediation programs, are expanding throughout the justice system all over the world; in the USA, mediation as an alternative mean of dispute resolution has been around in various forms since the 1960s. School mediation received particular national attention in 1984 when the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) was formed. NAME brought together educators and mediators working in neighborhood justice centers to consider how best to teach about mediation and conflict resolution. The mediation effort in schools was also spurred

by the development of local programs that have grown to American national stature. Globally, Conflict Resolution Education

(CRE) and peer mediation in particular, spread all over the world including mature projects in Argentina, New Zealand, Australia or Canada; in Europe, mediation school programs have been implemented in countries such as France, Great-Britain, Switzerland, Belgium, Poland, German, Spain, among others.

PEER MEDIATION GOALS

Johnson & Johnson (1995) present peer mediation basically as a structured process in which a neutral and impartial student assists two or more students to negotiate an integrative resolution to their conflict. The mediation is described as a process in which disputants are actively involved in the resolution of their own conflicts, assisted by trained peers.

Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs emphasize students learning how to manage their own conflicts, by training both mediators and disputants to listen effectively, think critically and engage in problem solving. Mediation seeks to solve a dispute and prevent its recurrence and students mediators learn to plan for the future; they learn about responsibilities as well rights, about consequences as well choices, internalizing key social and affective skills (Cremin, 2007).

According to research mediators may, in fact, beneficiate of a large increase in social skills, comparing to disputants or control students (Epstein, 1996); increased self-esteem and empathy as byproducts of conflict resolution and peer mediation training has also been documented (Maresca, 1996; Türnüklü et al., 2009). Haft and Weiss (1998) even suggested that positive effects of peer mediation might go beyond the school and enhance positive community relations. Some initial evidence shows that mediators may transfer their constructive conflict skills to sibling conflicts at home (Gentry and Benenson, 1993), using the skills similarly in family and school settings (Johnson and Johnson, 2001).

Most importantly, studies of mediation practices in schools reveal positive impact on school climate, contributing to safer learning environment. Haft and Weiss (1998) suggested that bringing a peer mediation process to schools can reduce violence, free up teachers to teach more and discipline less and increase student morale.

In 2003 Burrell, Zirbel and Allen lead a meta-analysis of forty-three studies published since 1985 and the results overwhelmingly support peer mediation effectiveness in terms of increasing students' conflict knowledge and skills, improving school climate and reducing negative behavior. Other inspiring meta-analysis conducted by Garrard and Lipsey (2007) report that participation in school- based conflict resolution education methods in general, including peer mediation, contributes to reduce anti-social behaviors (disruptive, aggressive and problem behaviors) among youth in kindergarten through twelfth grade in USA schools.

Recent studies also highlight a marked reduction in anti-social incidents leading to improvement in social school climate following the implementation of these approaches (Noaks and Noaks, 2009).

Concluding, these programs have the potential to induce school climates that foster pro-social behavior. Pupils become empowered to solve their own problems, they develop conflict resolution strategies and a safe learning environment is created for both pupils and staff.

A PEER MEDIATION PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION ON PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS

A Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation program is being developed by CONSENSUS Association in two different schools (EB 2/3 Guilherme Stephens – Middle School - and Escola Secundária com 3º Ciclo de Pinhal do Rei – Middle and High School), placed at Marinha Grande, Portugal. This project is included in a social program to prevent addictions and create social responses to the youngest in risk, named WINGS, coordinated by Associação para o Desenvolvimento Económico e Social da Região da Marinha Grande (ADESER IPSS – Society for the Economical and Social Development of Marinha Grande Region) and financed by Instituto das Drogas e Toxicodependências (IDT - State Institute to the Prevention of Drugs and Addictions).

The program implementation includes a Consensus experienced mediation team, specifically trained in conflict resolution skills and school mediation.

The program has four implementation stages.

1. Assessment stage: the Consensus mediators team held private meetings with the school direction and the school counselor, followed by a facilitating meeting with some teachers to acknowledge

their needs and identify the major problems that arise in school context. Using this information the team can promote a first draft of the intervention design.

2. Second stage: this team promotes informative and explanatory school meetings with teachers, students, parents, and other educators, open to the surrounding community. The program intends to involve all school community, bringing out the peer mediation as a conflict resolution alternative to solve interpersonal conflicts among students, inviting all to understand and participate in the achievement of the program goals.

During this stage, a training course in mediation skills for teachers is provided. It includes classes about (a) conflict theory; (b) communication skills, including active listening, empathy, self-expression, assertiveness, accepting criticism and giving feedback, and respecting differences; (c) interpersonal conflicts skills, which include negotiation and problem solving skills; (c) emotions management such as recognizing and expressing one's emotions, empathizing with others feelings, understanding the nature and reactions to anger, developing self-control and anger management, and signaling behavior that triggers interpersonal conflicts; (d) the mediation process; (e) peer mediation program design.

A team of mediators is selected from this initial group of teachers and prepared to support and supervise the future peer mediators, guaranteeing the program continuity.

3. At this stage, Consensus mediators start the selection of peer mediators among students and their training in conflict resolution, using the teacher team support. The model of peer selection aims to involve all students but only a few will be selected for the specific training. How does it work? Consensus mediator team defines a mediator profile, based upon leadership and communication personal skills, sense of responsibility and ability to develop empathy. This profile is provided to all class directors because they are the teachers that best know their students. In each classroom students are asked to name two classmates they would trust and seek help in resolving their interpersonal conflicts, also intending to promote diversity of genre and ethnic differences. The selection program intends to achieve the mediator respect and recognition among their peers.

Finally the student training begins, promoting the same skills that were already developed during the teachers training. The 20 class-hour training is applied following Cohen model and its suggestions (Cohen, 1995).

Currently, the Peer mediation program in the schools of Marinha Grande are at the third stage – Peer Mediators Training - involving 42 kids between 10 and 15 years old at Guilherme Stephens School and 36 kids at Pinhal do Rei High School, aged from 13 to 17 years old.

Following the Peer Mediators training stage, the school will implement the peer mediation program, supported by the help and supervision of teachers mediators. The Consensus mediation team is trying to adapt the peer mediation program to school regulations and procedures, in straight cooperation with teachers and the school direction.

How does mediation process take place? The teacher or the counselor gets together with kids in conflict and explain them the process and mediation goals. If they are prepared to mediation, the teacher chooses a mediator from a list of trained peer mediators, according to age and genre and, when possible, to ethnic differences. The Consensus team have already prepared forms to manage the process: the “consent” form must be signed by the kids involved in conflict and it includes parties and mediator identification and a list of mediation rules and principles; a form to write the “final compromise” if they succeed in solving the conflict; a parties enquiry about the mediation process and the mediators performance; and an enquiry to be filled by the mediators as a self-reflection about their work.

The teacher mediator has a supervising role, however he or she must respect the confidentiality of the process. Teacher’s mediators and peer mediators will gather together to talk about what happened during the performed mediation sessions; the positive outcomes; their difficulties during the sessions and how to improve their skills.

4. The final part reports to an evaluation stage. After 6 months to one year of peer mediation program implementation, the Consensus team will organize meetings with the teacher team to analyze forms, mediation sessions and discuss inquiries and talk about what can be improved or need to be changed.

A more refined research project will take place during this period, promoting an evaluation enquiry to all school community about conflict and their resolution by peer mediation. The following questions will be addressed:

1. Number of mediation sessions that took place and percentage of reached agreements.

2. How peers mediation has impact on teachers' and students' perceptions of school climate.

3. How peer mediation has impact on students' conflict attitudes and behaviors in terms of how frequently they are involved in conflict, how frequently they help others who are in conflict, their conflict styles, their tendency toward aggressive behavior (verbal, physic or psychological aggression) and their ability to demonstrate or enact the skills taught in training.

- 3.1 Number and type of discipline referrals drop out and suspension rate will be measured.

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