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Brian Dekker
Trinity College

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Brian Dekker
Education 400
Senior Research Project
Prof. Jack Dougherty
December 10, 2001

Peer Mediation: How Does It Influence Student-to-Student Interaction?

My research question is: How does peer mediation at the middle school level affect interpersonal relationships that exist among students, and is peer mediation implemented differently across schools in Hartford County?

Statistics reported in the Hartford Courant show that in 1999, “14 percent of the state’s public school students were suspended or expelled from school,” and that there were 14,432 seventh graders and 15,069 eighth graders who had disciplinary offenses (Green, “Kicking...”A1). Middle school students are at an age when their peer group influences them to an extraordinary degree. At the same time, because of their newfound independence, learning how to resolve the various conflicts that arise becomes increasingly important. In order to accomplish this, the acquisition of effective problem solving skills is critical, and for this purpose, the peer mediation process may be an innovative and creative resource. “Peer mediation is a structured process consisting of specific steps to help disputants define and solve a problem” (Daunic, 2). It attempts to move away from the “punitive, seclusionary measures” that traditionally have been taken, and help students to resolve problems by changing the way in which they “conceptualize conflict” (Daunic, 2).

School personnel who run these programs say that they “offer alternatives to violence. Instead of physical fights, threats and verbal abuse, students are taught specific communication and conflict resolution skills...[which] lead the students and their peer

mediators through a process of critical thinking and problem-solving in order to arrive at a mutually beneficial solution” (Stomfay, 4). In addition to teaching students these essential skills, some of the specific benefits of using this system include: encouraging students to take responsibility for their own behavior, creating a safer, more secure school environment, lowering teacher stress by providing more options for dealing with problem behavior, increasing instructional time by decreasing the amount of time that must be devoted to discipline, and helping students to “understand how cultural diversity can affect interpersonal communication and human interactions” (Daunic, 2). A pilot program in Minnesota that used peer mediation through the “Peacemaker Program” reported that the “frequency of student-student conflicts...dropped 80 percent, while conflicts referred to the principal were reduced to zero. A Wisconsin middle school reported that 189 successful student disputes were mediated during the first six months of its program” (Stomfay, 4).

One study of a school that was using a peer mediation system even showed a “ripple effect from the program, with parents and students indicating that they were resolving their home conflicts in new and more productive ways, and with noticeable benefits to sibling relationships” (Stomfay, 4). After the Beacon Hill School began using peer mediation, “incidents of physical aggression...fell by as much as 50 percent” and the author writes that “students involved in peer mediation models carry their newfound skills into many other situations, such as demonstrating better listening skills and more self-disciplined behavior at home” (Roesener, 5). A teacher who was physically assaulted by a student, and whose school then adopted a peer mediation program, writes, “Believe me, it works” (Adler, 2).

Johnson writes that “even in schools where weapons are rare, students often try to resolve conflicts by using destructive strategies....most students seem to be unaware and ignorant of steps that would allow them to manage conflicts constructively” (Johnson, 1). A compelling reason for developing peer mediation programs was summed up by some comments of the program director at School A. He states, “As a teacher in the classroom, before I became the director here, I was seeing that the students needed more than just the academic piece....many times they really couldn’t concentrate on the academic because of all the issues they were dealing with. Some of it involved their own issues...but some of it was conflicts with other students, sometimes even conflicts with teachers. Two things stood out: The need for counseling, and also the need for peer mediation programs that they could use to resolve those conflicts with others.”

My thesis is: Peer mediation is an effective method of problem resolution among middle school students. It improves interpersonal relationships and decreases the occurrence of violent conflicts. There are significant differences in how peer mediation is implemented across schools in Hartford County.

My primary sources of data have been interviews with the directors of four middle school peer mediation programs (Schools A, B, C, and D) and direct observation of a complete peer mediation session at School A. I interviewed each of the four directors using a prepared series of questions, which were as follows:

When and why does the peer mediation process work?
 What training do peer mediators receive?
 What types of cases seem most amenable to the process?
 Have you run into an issue where a problem could not be resolved through peer mediation? What is the next step if this happens?
 Have you noticed any school-wide changes since the program started?
 Do you know what the teachers’ perceptions of this whole process are?

In observing an actual peer mediation session, I have attempted to identify the nature and details of the problem or dispute, to record what is said by each party as far as possible, to identify and analyze the dynamics of the communication, and to determine the effectiveness of the process in resolving the problem.

Before beginning the interviews, I first explained to each director what the study involves. I said that all information would be kept completely confidential and used only for research purposes, and that they could freely withdraw at any point. I explained the possible benefits of the project to them and said that I would shred all confidential information at the conclusion of the project. I provided my name and phone number and that of the Director of the Educational Studies Department at Trinity. Then, they each signed a consent form that included all this information.

I will begin by presenting the primary source evidence I have gathered in support of my thesis:

School A is a large inner city school, with 1300 students in 7th and 8th grade. Schools B, C, and D are medium size suburban middle schools with students from predominantly middle socioeconomic class backgrounds. Each school has between 600 and 700 students in grades five through eight or six through eight.

In explaining when and why peer mediation works, the program director at School A stressed that students' interpersonal conflicts can drastically affect their school performance and lead to extremely problematical behavior. This school has such an active and comprehensive program that I assume it would probably be classified as a "model program." It actually operates everyday, whenever needed, so problems can be swiftly addressed. The process starts with a referral from the classroom teacher to the

vice-principal, and then the vice-principal sends the referral to the peer mediation team. The team begins their part of the program with an “intake, where the students are given the opportunity to express themselves, say their piece, discuss their feelings and how they see things, and receive some counseling from one of us. This will also give us an opportunity to provide them with some suggestions for the future. So by the time they come to peer mediation, they’ve talked to the teacher, the vice-principal, and one of us....they’ve calmed down, become less belligerent and adversarial,” and are ready and willing to try to work things out in a peer mediation session.

“Director A” says that by the end of last year they had 65 trained student mediators in the school (although many have graduated and new training sessions are now in progress) as well as “an actual center that is dedicated each day to peer mediation. We hold these sessions during school, because many students are engaged in after-school activities—and before school is also out because, as you may or may not know, many of them find it very difficult to start on time in the morning.” He says that sessions are often conducted during lunch “waves” to cut down on time taken away from classes, and that he will often just walk into the cafeteria and find the mediators he needs to conduct the sessions that are about to be held.

Schools B and C had much less active peer mediation programs than that of School A, so I was somewhat surprised to find that the program at School D was almost as comprehensive as School A’s. It is set up so that it is always in operation and therefore can address problems quickly with a session. There are 30 trained mediators in a school of 600 students. In describing why it works well, Director D said, “The reason that I think it works, is because it gives the students a chance to talk about and work out

their conflicts. It also gives them a chance to practice conflict resolution skills. We usually have our mediations every morning...I get a referral and set up the mediations with two mediators and anywhere from 2 to 3 disputants. So they sit there with someone their own age, so they don't feel intimidated or that they are going to get in trouble, and they talk about their problems. They first tell their stories, and then they come up with possible solutions. They brainstorm and choose which solution best suits both of them and then they sign a contract and we keep the contract. If anything happens again, then we have the contract to pull up and discuss. It's really a skill-developing process for our students, and not only that, they also get the message that if they make fun of another person or do something inappropriate, we are going to talk about it. They have a choice to refuse, but they never do. So, it's really a total process for our students."

School C program director said that the "process works because kids are working with kids. I think that students respond to each other faster and are more apt to listen to other students than to adults." However, she also said that the sessions are only held for a forty minute period several days a week, which would mean that problems may not be addressed for several days. Director A made the point that if his team did not deal with a problem right away, the chances are that the "fight would have already taken place" by the time they got to it. At School B, more of an emphasis is placed on peer mediation being offered as an alternative to disciplinary action, perhaps to make it more appealing to the teachers, most of whom were not yet fully sold on the new program. Yet this director still sees it as very useful, especially when trouble is "brewing" and "big problems" are effectively averted through the process. My feeling was that at this school

the process was reserved for mainly the “larger” problems that arose, while Schools A and D were more interested in and willing to deal with the more minor issues as well.

All four directors describe training programs that sound thorough and well-planned, providing the students with both a theoretical framework for understanding the process of peer mediation as well as practical experience in using it. Director C provides a number of sessions on “listening skills,” while Director A explains, “they learn how to look for the [real] problem behind what the surface problem is, to deal with the emotions involved, to recognize that students may...need to probe deeper” in order to understand how they really feel about an issue. While he now does much of the training himself, large city law firms have sent people to help him. Students at School B learn to “brainstorm with kids to try and solve problems...to help them develop ideas and make agreements...and to understand when a particular issue is too big for them to deal with themselves.” All programs teach mediators to draw up the “contract” that disputants sign at the end of the session specifying exactly what is expected of each party. All directors said the students gain practical experience through role-playing, reading scripts and training manuals, videos, skits and other activities and materials before they engage in the process with actual disputants.

Director D says, “In terms of training, we actually have always had formal training off-site, and we started off with a three day training with trainers from the Department of Youth Services and the Wheeler Clinic. But for the first time this year, we decided to do our own training...we knew what we wanted to focus on...so [the student mediators] train with me every day of the week...we meet between 8:05 and 8:35. Now, we’re practicing presentations that we’ll be giving to all of the advisors, and we’ll be

going into every homeroom to talk about peer mediation and do a role-play. We'll also be doing a faculty meeting. Our guidance and school psychologist interns also train with them on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We have 7th and 8th grade peer mediators—our 7th graders are the trainees and we spend the whole year training them. I don't put them in mediations till the second half of the school year, and when I put them in the mediation, I put them in with a trained 8th grade mediator. So, you're almost an apprentice for a year before you actually start doing the mediations."

Interestingly, Director A says that often the school bullies are deliberately chosen to become mediators: "Our idea of an ideal peer mediator is not a triple honor student or someone who is necessarily really excelling in school. Many times, those students have no standing with the students who are bullying each other or causing problems, so we actually try to bring the bullies themselves in to try and help solve the problem as peer mediators. When the students see that the bully is no longer creating problems and is actually trying to help solve them, the kids look at that and feel they should do the same. We need a cross-section of students in the school and can't just have "A" students. We find that the students who best serve as peer mediators have actually been through the process themselves, and know how to help work other students through problems."

When I asked what types of cases seem to be most amenable to the process, all four directors were unanimous in saying that "rumor spreading, disagreements among friends and other friendship issues, and sometimes bullying" are problems that are extremely common in middle school and also highly amenable to resolution through this process. Director D added that racial slurs and stealing property (such as a hat) were also problems at her school but that "most of our cases are name-calling, pushing, teasing,

rumor, threatening, and friendship issues. In terms of violence and fighting, lots of times the vice principal will send them to us after they have dealt with the problem. The vice principal might say that as part of their discipline, they need to go to peer mediation.” Program directors at Schools B and C said that they will not deal at all with violence through peer mediation, that it is an issue that must automatically be handled through the vice principal. While the student mediators at all four schools are taught that problems such as guns, drugs, sexual harassment, and suicidal thoughts that may emerge during a session are not up for mediation, Schools A and D are willing to deal with fighting in their programs, often in conjunction with the vice principal. Director D says, “we will do however many sessions it takes to solve the problem. Usually, they come to conclusion in the first or second session. But, we often find that there are more students involved, so we may have another mediation with a different combination of students. Let’s say the conflict is between A and B, but also between C. In that situation, we might have another mediation, but most are resolved in the first session.”

During my observation of a session at School A, rumor spreading was the issue. Four 13-year-old girls were the “disputants” but as the argument very rapidly unfolded, it became apparent that at least ten other girls in the school were also involved in this complicated conflict. Earlier in the day, the dispute had caused a loud face-to-face confrontation between two of the students in the art room, and so the problem had come to the attention of the peer mediation team. The concept of how a rumor can start was explained to the disputants as being akin to the game “telephone,” where the first person gets the message correct and then it becomes distorted. The four 13-year-old girls, angry at first, seemed to grasp this explanation immediately, nodding their heads, and

enthusiastically participated in a discussion of the issue and its causes and possible solutions.

They seemed to get a true appreciation for the fact that rumors are usually untrue, and one of the girls observed, "People just like drama," and that she could understand how rumors could get started because people like to see conflicts. They agreed not to believe everything they hear, and two girls who didn't like each other agreed to be civil to each other—they didn't have to be best friends but they would not fight with each other or say anything negative. They signed a contract to make it official and agreed to return if more problems arose. The entire process took about twenty minutes.

The girls had come into the session appearing angry, and as they left, it appeared that they felt the problem had addressed and resolved. On the way out of the room, they were smiling and talking to each other. Judging by the attitude of the girls at the start of the session, by the session itself, and by the greatly changed, much calmer, happier, and more cooperative attitude of the girls at the end, I would have to say that this peer mediation session appeared to be a great success. It accomplished exactly what it intended to do: Resolve conflicts, teach problem solving skills that can also be used in other situations, and improve interpersonal relationships among students.

I asked the directors if they had encountered problems that could not be resolved through peer mediation, and if so, what was the next step taken to address the situation. They were unanimous in saying that this was rare. Director A explained, "We have had situations like this, but very few of them. For example, during the first year of the peer mediation program, we had 110 mediations and 106 of them were successful. All four [of the unsuccessful cases] involved two sisters who were very negative when they came

in, and what they were looking for was simply an opportunity to take shots at each other. So, they were agreeing to the ground rules, but then just taking shots at each other when the opportunity came to discuss the issue. In a case like this case, the issue is sent to the vice principal who made the original referral to us.” He added that a more likely situation occurs when unexpected information comes out during a peer mediation session that must be dealt with through other channels. He says, “The mediation is kind of like a safety net, and I have been really impressed with things such as suicidal tendencies that have been discovered during a session. We have had several cases of that where the student is depressed to the point of contemplating taking their own life and we have been able to help with that. The next step when an issue like this arises is to get a second opinion from one of the social workers, and then to possibly refer them to the school health clinic or get the Institute of Living involved.”

We have had other situations where the student has said that they don’t want to do the mediation, and a few of us will take a couple of stabs at trying to change their mind. I try to emphasize to them that with peer mediation, they own the process and have something to say. They also have the ability to solve it on their own terms, which saves face, and they don’t have to accept someone else’s judgment, which they might not like. Many times this works, but if not, I just grab someone else and tell them to try and change the student's mind. My approach is for them to be successful at the mediation.”

The Director at School B, where the program seems to be more tied in with the disciplinary process than at the other schools, said this has happened when students are “very stubborn...and they don’t want to make any changes or agreements.” Next, “It becomes an office issue.” He adds that this is unfortunate because “what we are trying to

do with peer mediation is make better use of the administrator's time." My impression was that the other three directors see their programs somewhat differently and would not make this comment. Rather, the others seem to convey that the primary purpose of the program is to benefit the students, and if it also makes the administrator's job more efficient, that is just an added bonus. Director C said that there was only one case that *almost* couldn't be resolved, but eventually was. She explains, "It involved friendship issues, and when they came back for their third mediation, I let them know that if they can't agree and carry out the contract, then the next step is the vice principal."

Director D says, "Yes, there was one where a student was getting into fights with everybody—I think we had six mediations with the same person. So, at that point, we say that we need to take a look at the problem. Usually, I would work extremely closely with the school psychologist, guidance counselor and vice principal, and we would make a decision as to what to do. There was an issue of friendships with girls that just kept going on and on, and so many girls were involved. What we found in this case was to have all the girls see the school psychologist, because there comes a point when you have to go beyond peer mediation. If the mediators came to me and said that it's not working and that the students were not cooperative, then I'd talk to them, and if they wouldn't cooperate with me, they would then go to the vice principal."

In terms of measuring school-wide changes, none of the directors could supply objective data to support their subjective views of any changes they had observed. The length of time that the program has been in effect, however, does appear to have a major effect. For instance, Director B said, "since the program is in its infancy" school-wide changes cannot yet be assessed. The program has been used somewhat longer at School

C, and while the director says, “there is less conflict” in the school, the degree of improvement is still “not yet measurable among students.”

At School A, however, the effect has been dramatic. The director states that before peer mediation was started, “we had something like ten to fifteen fights a day” and now, “we don’t see that anymore, the number of fights has decreased dramatically.” In fact, students newly arrived at the school may fight, but “once they learn the culture of the school, these problems quickly improve.” In addition, pre-peer mediation, “the lines in the vice-principals office [for disciplinary problems] might consist of 13 or 14 students. Most of them had to do with conflicts between students, and it really helped us when we talked to teachers and let them know that they needed to keep their eyes and ears open to detect if a conflict was happening. Teachers see that they now have a place that they can refer students where they can see results. Originally, the only way of dealing with it was to suspend the students involved in the dispute. This was not very successful, because they would come back and still have the same unresolved issues. Even though the social workers were doing a kind of ‘pseudo’ conflict resolving activity in their offices, it was not working, and the students would often be involved in the same dispute all year. So, we had a lot of teachers that became converts and decided that the program was helpful. We tend to be very self-critical here, but I have to honestly say that the peer mediation program has been extremely successful.”

The director of the program at School D also reported that there were “definitely” school wide changes: “the vice principal always says that there have been a lot less disciplinary problems and a lot less conflicts [since starting the program]. The first year, we thought that maybe the kids had just matured, and then we realized that it was the

mediation program that was making the difference. Eventually, with the skills, they start to solve their own conflicts, and doing their own mediation before they need to come with us. Especially this year, we schedule the mediations and by the time they come to mediation, they say that they have already resolved the problem. We still work through the student's problems, but we are finding that a lot of them are already resolved. So it's great, but I do have 30 mediators and so I need to have *some* mediations." (She laughs)

When I questioned the directors about what the teachers' perceptions of the peer mediation program were, Director D stressed that "the teachers in this school are very supportive. We do more than peer mediation here, the peer mediators do a friendship week, and the peer mentoring program also. The mediators are actually doing presentations for the faculty where they are telling them what mediation is, what they can and cannot mediate. So, the teachers are very supportive of everything that we do. I don't know if it has made their jobs easier, but I do know a lot of them come to me and tell me that they have a possible mediation. Lots of times they will discuss it with me, and the two of us will decide if it's good for mediation. I have had many of them say to me that it's such a great thing, and it does seem to be very, very positive." As noted earlier, Director A also believes that many of the teachers feel the peer mediation program is a real asset to their school.

The director at School B reports that "the teachers know what the program is, and understand what the procedures are, but aren't directly involved. There are only a handful of people in the school who oversee the program, so the teachers don't know much about it. We are planning on going into the teams, and doing skits explaining how

the peer mediation process works to students and teachers. Generally, the teachers know how the program works and refer students, but they aren't very involved with it."

Director C seems to be saying that the teachers like the program but that they don't quite understand it: "I think that teachers are very aware of the process, but I think one of the difficulties is getting the program advertised—how does the process occur, how does a teacher get one of their students to me and the mediators? I think the teachers perceive that this is a good program and they know that if some conflicts occur that they can't deal with in class, they can call me and say that they need to send me a couple of students. It relieves them of taking that class time away, and supports them with the conflict that is going on in their class."

In analyzing and interpreting this primary source data, I believe that the evidence clearly supports the thesis—that peer mediation is an effective method of problem resolution among middle school students, and that at the same time there are significant differences in how it is implemented across schools in Hartford County.

There seem to be several important factors that influence the effectiveness of the programs as well as the obvious differences that exist among them. Although my interpretation is subjective because of the lack of objective data, it seems apparent that Schools A and D are the more effective programs. At these schools, the program definitely contributes to improved interpersonal relationships among students, decreases the number of violent conflicts, and promotes an understanding of the whole process of problem solving. In comparison, Schools B and C probably also benefited to some extent from having the peer mediation process available, but my impression was that it was yet not being used to its full potential.

I believe the most important reason for this difference has to do with the size of the program and its availability during the school day. At Schools A and D, the programs are open to the students literally all the time, so problems can be addressed almost immediately. As Director A said, “We try to catch their anger before it turns into rage,” and in a school that used to have 10 to 15 fights a day, and now has very few, the value of this rapid response is huge. These two schools also have the great advantage of having directors whose jobs seem to allow them to devote, if necessary, a substantial part of their day to peer mediation, and also a room with a conference table that is set aside for this purpose. They have the resources and knowledge to train new peer mediators each year, and have even refined their training to fit their particular needs. The programs are well known in the schools, they are a real part of the school structure, and the students and teachers in general trust it and believe it is something they could use if necessary.

A less tangible impression is that the success of a program like this depends also on the enthusiasm and positive attitude of the program director. I did notice that the directors at Schools A and D both seemed very interested in telling me about their programs, and in comparison with the directors at Schools C and D, they answered the same questions with much longer responses and with more enthusiasm and positive feeling in their voices and attitudes. I think that Directors C and D are in positions that allow them much less time to devote to peer mediation, and it certainly is not their primary responsibility. It is possible that they have much fewer resources to devote to it, and this may affect their attitude as well.

Secondary sources also provide evidence that peer mediation can be an effective tool, and also that significant differences exist among programs in the Hartford area.

During the past year, the Hartford Courant has described some of the peer mediation programs in various area schools, and a reporter noted that “Peer mediation...has been sweeping through the state in the wake of the Columbine shootings” (Green, “In Times...”A3). Peer mediators at a Meriden school say, “this is how you begin to change the culture of high schools and middle schools...this gives kids a chance to talk...it stops a lot of the violence before it gets physical” (Green, A3). Student mediators say that the program “has a unique advantage over other forms of violence prevention” and an 8th grader from Durham says, “It makes your school environment a better place.” A program director at a North Haven school explains that because of peer mediation, “many more kids know how to resolve conflicts peacefully” (Green, A4). Researcher Stomfay goes so far as to say that peer mediation—which is “based on a foundation of applied conflict resolution—offers viable opportunities for an entire school community to create a safer, more harmonious world...students learn skills that have the potential to create safer and more peaceful homes, schools and communities” (Stomfay, 1, 5).

Courant reporter Reitz writes that “many schools in Connecticut have created or revived peer mediation programs as part of an emphasis on character development. Avon had a program until five years ago, but the training trailed off” (Reitz, B3). The Avon Middle School program is now being revived, but unlike School A, where bullies were deliberately chosen to be mediators, Avon’s new mediators “were nominated by classmates for being trustworthy, having good judgment and being respected as people who can communicate well enough to help resolve problems” (Reitz, B3). The demographics at these two schools are very different, and so these contrasting methods of choosing peer mediators may actually be perfect for meeting the particular needs of each

school. In Avon, the bullies might not be taken seriously, and at School A, what the director calls the “community that causes trouble” might not want to listen to the star students. Another Courant article described the Fox Middle School program and quotes an intern as saying, “They [the mediators] are not all honor students...but that’s what we want. We want a real mix of students who can really relate to their peers and tell them how it is”(Ubinas, B3).

Townley would agree with this and notes that “increasingly, schools are tailoring their conflict resolution programs to fit their particular communities”(Townley, 1). She says that peer mediation gives young people the capacity to alter not only their own behavior but that of others as well—and by extension, the culture of society at large” (Townley, 1). Daunic suggests that programs be geared to each particular school’s routine, culture, school schedule, and student characteristics, and she believes that it is vital for peer mediators to “represent a cross section of the student population” so disputants will not view them as “a select group that is less apt to understand their problems” (Daunic, 4, 6).

Daunic writes that the usefulness of peer mediation is actually rooted in developmental and social psychology. “Middle school students value peer relationships highly and are heavily influenced by them” and in order for them to be able to cope successfully with “the complex demands of their environment” they must learn, among other things, how to resolve the inevitable conflicts that come up in the school environment and with their peers. (Daunic, 3). This requires learning problem-solving skills that include “effective communication, anger management, and taking another’s perspective,” all of which are taught in peer mediation programs. (Daunic, 3)

Stomfay states that social learning theorists, many of whom have contributed to peer mediation's theoretical framework, confirm that an "intellectual and emotional impact results when a potentially dangerous conflict is resolved and disputants 'save face' and continue with their school lives" (Stomfay, 2). Theorists David and Roger Johnson have "emphasized that cooperative, rather than competitive, relationships within the classroom create the positive environment that fosters true learning and conflict resolution. They believe that students can learn to respect others' viewpoints through controversy experiences and that a 'structured controversy approach' [such as peer mediation] can enhance and open students' minds to differing or opposing views" (Stomfay, 2).

Johnson describes two types of school peer mediation programs: the "cadre" and the "total student body" programs. The cadre approach involves training a few specially selected students to serve as peer mediators, while the "total student body" method involves training every student in the school in this way. (Johnson, 2, 3) As part of their "peace education" concept, the Johnson team actually recommends that all students be given the opportunity to serve as peer mediators, after they have been taught and have mastered the necessary basic skills. Students are then "assigned specific days and hours during which they are 'on call' to handle conflicts that arise throughout the school" and as the responsibility for peer mediation is rotated, each student has the opportunity to act as mediator (Stomfay, 2; Johnson, 2). This approach is being used in the Chicago Conflict Resolution Program and the Teaching Students to be Peacemakers program in Minnesota. (Johnson, 2).

Powell reviewed peer mediation programs at nine schools and found “limited documentation on, and considerable variation in, the implementation and success of these projects...and that the role of the project coordinator (if any) may vary widely, with presumably varying results” (Powell, 1, 2). He says that considering the large (but unknown) number of schools that have instituted these types of programs and the “magnitude of the youth violence problem, the financial costs of the programs, and the many hours devoted to them by students and faculty,” their true effectiveness must be determined. (Powell, 2). With regard to evaluation, he says that “at the least, pre-project and post-project comparisons within the same school should be undertaken...and these data should be saved from year to year, and tabulated on a school-wide basis rather than stored in individual students’ files” (Powell, 9). He adds that a common problem is that “disciplinary actions of all types are lumped together,” and he suggests subdividing this data...for example, “disciplinary actions for fights should be counted separately from disciplinary actions for shouting” (Powell, 9). Along these lines, Daunic comments, “We need more research to determine the impact of the mediation process on the level of resolutions students reach, and whether those resolutions result in positive, lasting changes in school climate” (Daunic, 9).

Powell’s team examined a North Carolina middle school that implemented a program for only the sixth grade. The school did keep track of statistics, and these indicated that the program had been successful, especially when compared with the statistics that included the other grades, which did not participate in the program. They found the following:

From the 1991-1992 school year to the 1992-1993 school year, disciplinary referrals of sixth grade students to the principal’s office dropped from 150 to 27

(82%), in-school suspensions of sixth grade students decreased from 52 to 30 (42%), and out-of-school suspensions of sixth grade students decreased from 40 to 1 (97%). In-school suspensions for the entire school increased by 25% and out-of-school suspensions for the entire school decreased by 26%. (Powell, 6).

Daunic and her group spent three years investigating “the protocols necessary for implementing a successful mediation program, factors that facilitated its effectiveness, and the ways students learned how to manage their peer conflicts” at three middle schools. (Daunic, 2) She reports that “of the factors we found to be most critical to successful implementation, committed leadership...was first and foremost. To make a program worthwhile, one or more school administrators must be committed to providing the necessary resources and following through with responsible leadership” (Daunic, 4). This is evident in the strong, knowledgeable, and dynamic leadership of both Directors A and D. They appear totally committed to their programs and have obtained the resources they need to make the programs work according to plan. Daunic also stresses that to be effective, the “mediation schedule must accommodate disputants in a timely manner” (Daunic, 6.). Both of the more effective programs in my investigation gave top priority to mediating conflicts as quickly as possible, often within an hour or two, and, according to Director A, this was really “the key to success.”

As Director A has done, Stomfay emphasizes the importance of including the school bullies, as much as possible, in the peer mediation process. She says that researchers have found that victimization by bullies reaches its highest level during the middle school years and they have criticized school staffs’ lack of concern in fully addressing bullying as a widespread problem” (Stomfay, 3). In pointing out the potential value of including bullies in the peer mediation process, she describes a videotape in which a former bully describes “how, as a peer mediator, he slowly came to understand

his victims' viewpoints and how his behavior had harmed the weaker and smaller students" (Stomfay, 3).

Stomfay reports on a number of schools that have had success with their peer mediation programs, although she admits that most of the evidence consists of anecdotal reports. In one school she studied, teachers said that "pressure to serve as disciplinarians" decreased as a result of the program, and students themselves said they "found they were using creative solutions and showing greater respect for each other as they grew more adept at using their communication and problem-solving skills." In fact, the researcher recommended that these skills be "embedded in the entire curriculum and philosophy of a school" (Stomfay, 3, 4)

Stomfay has written that "most educators will agree that finding ways to resolve conflict peaceably in America's schools may be our primary challenge," and that "we must take a closer look at the process for building safer, more harmonious schools" (Stomfay, 1). I believe that the evidence supporting the use of peer mediation as an effective method of problem solving among middle school students—that it improves interpersonal relationships and decreases the occurrence of violent conflicts—is convincing. Through my research, I have concluded that peer mediation is a worthwhile method that schools across the country should consider using. Because significant differences can be seen in how these programs are implemented in schools in Hartford County and elsewhere, further research to determine the most effective methods of implementation are needed.

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