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**PUPILS RESOLVING DISPUTES; PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS
FROM 15 ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH SUCCESSFUL PEER MEDIATION
SERVICES**



Introduction

Violence in schools is perceived, internationally, to be both on the increase and a matter for urgent attention (Slee 2003). Although definitions of violence in schools, and methods of measuring it, remain contentious, it is certainly the case that conflict resolution training for pupils, and peer initiatives in particular, are seen to be of value in reducing cases of bullying and anti-social behaviour (e.g. Cowie, Jennifer and Sharp 2003). This paper aims to present the outcomes of research that was carried out at a peer mediator's conference in November 2001. This conference was particularly useful from the point of view of research, as all of the schools who attended did so in order to celebrate several years of successful peer mediation practice. The research question that this paper therefore aims to illuminate is: what was it about these

schools that had enabled them to succeed where many fail? The perceptions of both teachers and pupil mediators will be presented here.

Background to the conference

60 peer mediators met for a conference at the Pergamon Hotel, Digbeth, Birmingham in November 2001. They were aged between 9 and 11, and were representatives from 15 schools where, for a number of years, pupils have been trained in how to resolve the playground disputes of other pupils. At a time when world conflict was preoccupying adults, this multi-ethnic group of young people met to share ideas on how to promote peace and friendship in the playground. This researcher was involved in setting up and running the conference in partnership with the staff and pupils of Stanville School, Birmingham. The day was particularly memorable for the mediators as both the chief education officer of Birmingham LEA, Prof. Tim Brighouse, and the right honourable secretary of state for education, Estelle Morris, attended part of the day in order to present the children with medals which had been produced by the Birmingham mint to celebrate their achievements.

The headteacher and staff at Stanville School hosted the conference as they felt that the presence of peer mediators in the playground was making a big difference to the quality of lunch and break times, and they wanted to offer their children the opportunity of meeting up with other successful mediators from elsewhere in the city. Catalyst Consultancy from Leamington Spa, who had provided the original peer mediation training, were asked to help organise the conference. 14 other schools known to be operating peer mediation in Birmingham were invited to send 3 pupils each with a teacher. The day was made possible by a grant from Quest Millennium.

Research Methods: Rationale

The research was carried out using qualitative research methods. The essentially humanistic research methods used enabled peer mediation to be reviewed through the eyes of the participants. The humanist is sceptical of standardisations of social and educational interventions and services and doubly sceptical of any attempts to make them standard for the sake of investigation. Stenhouse (1987) prefers the 'medical' to the 'agricultural-botanical' paradigm for educational research, recognising that medical practitioners and researchers have traditionally reported individual cases which

illuminate the incidence and treatment of particular conditions, rather than depending heavily on the control of variables.

The Sample

15 primary schools were used for this research. The main school that organised the conference, Stanville Junior and Infant School in Birmingham, is in Sheldon in Birmingham. Stanville, in common with the other schools, is an urban school in Birmingham with mixed social and ethnic intake. The other 14 schools were invited to attend the conference on the basis that that they were known to be operating peer mediation services in Birmingham. This ensured an otherwise random sample of schools from both the inner and outer rings of the city of Birmingham.

Each school was asked to send one teacher and 3 year 5 pupils (Stanville sent 15 Year 5 mediators). The teachers were chosen by the schools following an invitation addressed to the 'peer mediation co-ordinator.' Some of these teachers were relatively senior in the school, whereas others were just starting out in teaching. One or two were learning mentors or learning support assistants.

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were used. Firstly, in order to gather basic information about how the services operate, one mediator per school was asked to stand up if a descriptor of peer mediation services applied to them. The descriptors are listed in Table One below. They were read out one at a time to the whole group during the morning of the conference. The activity took no more than 10 minutes. The number of pupils standing up for each descriptor was recorded. Secondly, in order to elicit what the teachers felt had contributed to the success of their peer mediation schemes, a co-researcher carried out an unstructured group interview in which the teachers were asked stimulus questions to the teachers whilst the pupils were occupied in workshops during the afternoon. The question was: 'What factors do you feel are responsible for the success of your peer mediation scheme?' The ensuing discussion was recorded and transcribed. Lastly, pupils were also asked to fill in a questionnaire with mainly open questions asking them about their views on mediation more generally. There were 25 questionnaires returned from 10 boys and 15 girls. The questionnaires concerned 8 of the 15 mediation services who were represented on the day at the conference.

Data analysis

The number of pupils standing up for each descriptor was simply recorded in a table and findings are discussed below. The responses to the pupil questionnaires are also summarised in tables, and individual quotes from mediators are used here to illustrate key points that emerge from the data.

The teacher interviews were analysed by grouping the findings into 'domains.' These arose naturally from the discussions, and were identified by the researchers. It was relatively easy to group the findings as the teachers were responding to each other, and the discussion followed themes that were easily identifiable. The domains reflected the main elements of successful peer mediation schemes according to the teachers, and are: pupil empowerment, a whole school approach, resources, support of mediators, choice rewards and incentives, and social skills training for all pupils. A summary of the contributions from the teachers, using their own words wherever possible, is recorded in Table Two.

Research Findings: Profile of services

The following table shows the results of asking one peer mediator per school to stand up if the following applies to their school mediation service, or to themselves.

Table One: A profile of how peer mediation services operate

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICE	NO. (MAX 15)
Service operates in the playground	5
Service operates inside the school	10
Mediators wear badges	5
Mediators wear caps	5
Mediators wear tabards, sweatshirts or t shirts	5
Mediators have produced a display with photos, details of the service etc. somewhere in the school	15
Mediators have done an assembly explaining their service	15
Mediators have met with lunchtime supervisors	7
Mediators have provided mediation training for teaching staff	7
Mediators operate a rota system for deciding who mediates when	15
Mediators sometimes mediate KS1 disputes	7
Mediators involved in more disputes between boys	5
Mediators involved in more disputes between girls	8
Mediators have had to stop a mediation because disputants have broken the rules	7
Mediators have carried out at least one successful mediation	15

Mediators have carried out many successful mediations	8
Mediators have used their skills at home	8

Table One shows that successful mediation services have a high profile with displays, assemblies and clearly visible ways of identifying mediators in the playground and around school. The array of badges, caps, sweatshirts etc. that pupils wore on the day of the conference was a testament to the inventiveness and individuality of each group of pupils. Almost half of the services had involved the pupils in meeting with all lunchtime supervisors and teachers in order to ensure effective communication. One third of the services operated in the playground with two thirds operating in the school. The advantages of having mediation inside and outside have been discussed elsewhere (Stacey 2000), but it is clearly perceived by the majority of the schools to be advantageous to have a room away from the hurly-burly of the playground. The rota system is well used as a means of ensuring that no pupils are losing too many of their playtimes.

The mediators who attended the conference were all year five (penultimate year of primary school) but just less than half of them operated their service for all pupils in the school from year five through to infant level. It is heartening to discover that the mediators were being used, with all of them having had the opportunity of putting their skills into practice in a real-life setting, and just over half of them having completed several mediations. In less successful services, mediators become discouraged when their newly found skills are not used due to poor take-up of the service. It is also heartening that peer mediators were using their skills at home, which suggests that the skills had become fully assimilated. The fact that half of the mediators had had to stop a mediation because the disputants broke the rules suggests that the mediators had the confidence to assert themselves in a difficult situation and that they were clear about the boundaries of their role.

The staff discussion group

Table Two shows the results of the group discussion. The main elements of successful peer mediation schemes according to the teachers (pupil empowerment, a whole school approach, resources, support of mediators, choice rewards and incentives, and social skills training for all pupils) correlate with this researcher's earlier research (Cremin, 2000) in particular the importance of an ethos in which pupils feel

empowered, and a whole school approach to effective conflict resolution. The role of the headteacher is, predictably, central to ensuring a high profile, efficient and well-resourced peer mediation service.

The teachers discussed how they tried to empower their pupils. The word 'empowerment' is out of vogue in some circles as it has been used rather liberally in settings where there has not been a genuine devolvement of power. These teachers believe that their peer mediation services are genuinely pupil-led and that pupils have feelings of ownership and empowerment. Voting for mediators, and proper recruitment procedures such as filling in an application form and attending an interview with peers, are identified as ways that schools can both educate pupils for citizenship, and provide structures in which pupils can practice responsible power and control. One teacher summarises by saying that she tries 'to stay out of it.' The ability to do this and to allow pupils to make their own mistakes safely is surely the gift of an inspired educator!

Table Two: Teacher discussion group findings

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL PEER MEDIATION	TEACHER COMMENTS
Pupil empowerment	Pupil led Onus on the children Empowering for them Democratic Pupils elect the mediators Linked with voting system of school council Pupils deal with application forms, selection and interviews We try to stay out of it
Whole school approach	Support of senior management Status and annual budget Part of school life Need to keep it going, can easily slip if not given high profile Hard if you are class-based Needs support from colleagues Needs a constant push You need to know the children Easier when embedded into school practice as the years have gone on Children know expectations of year 5 and 6, strong routines
Resources	Time / Money / Materials needed Trips important We meet with other schools for bowling, discos etc. The more mediators the better With 16 there is a critical mass
	They know that we are here for back up

Support	Fortnightly meetings to keep enthusiasm going Strict boundaries about what they should be dealing with Emotional pressure not too great Refer fights and bullying back to an adult 5 minute debrief at 5 to 1 before registration. Need to get things off their chests. We do that every day
Choice, Rewards and incentives	Some year groups need incentives Use computer suite to design reward certificates for other children Accept when children say they don't want to do it any more Need a get out Opt out clause at the end of every half term Contract makes it official
Skills training	Need Circle Time in all classrooms to develop skills Year 5 class doing ten weeks of conflict resolution training to prepare them for selection of mediators Programme from nursery to year 6 doing Circle Time weekly in assembly time Class representative has a slot to feed into Circle Time Children develop skills to mediate by learning to talk about their problems in Circle Time

The term 'whole school approach' has similarly become jaded in recent years, with many advocates claiming that it is the only way that this or that initiative can work. Despite the over-use of the phrase, it is nevertheless usually the case that initiatives do need the support of the whole school community in order to achieve success. Peer mediation is shown here to be no exception, with the teachers listing several aspects of what a whole school approach means in practice. Headteacher support appears vital. Expressions of this support include providing an annual budget for the peer mediation co-ordinator, and providing time to ensure that the service maintains a high profile amongst teaching and non-teaching staff. Status comes from the peer mediation service becoming embedded in school life, with clear expectations and routines.

Difficulties in maintaining a whole-school approach include the feeling that there needs to be 'a constant push' and that the service 'can easily slip if not given a high profile.' Where colleagues are not supportive, a whole school approach becomes more difficult. It also becomes more difficult if peer mediation coordinators are class-based and do not teach the mediators.

Resources, as ever, are identified as being essential to the success of peer mediation initiatives. Beyond the need for the proper training of staff and pupils (usually carried

out over 3 days) the budgetary needs of peer mediation are mainly tied up in providing badges, trips and incentives for the mediators. Several of the teachers involved in this discussion had already formed links with other schools which enabled them to arrange trips and parties in common.

The teachers spoke of the need for on-going support and rewards for the mediators. Some groups of mediators seem intrinsically motivated with no need for any reward, whereas others seem to need other incentives. All of the teachers spoke of the need to provide opportunities for the mediators to de-brief and feel supported by the adult responsible for the peer mediation service. Some teachers were doing this on a fortnightly basis, whilst others were doing it every day. It appears to be important that the mediators are also clear about the boundaries of their role. In particular they were told what sorts of disputes they should hand over to an adult, and when their 'post' would end. One teacher stressed that it is important to accept when a child doesn't want to do it any more, whilst another said that they have contracts in their school with an opt-out clause at the end of each half term.

The final area that the teachers stressed as important was the use of initiatives such as Circle Time (Moseley 1994) to prepare the ground, consolidate and extend peer mediation services. This correlates with the findings from my previous research (Stacey, 2000) which suggested that the best possible strategy for preparing the ground for peer mediation was 30 minutes of Circle Time per week across the whole school. Circle Time can be used to teach key personal and social skills such as listening, co-operation, impulse control and collaborative problem-solving. Building pupils' skills in these areas goes beyond the development of effective conflict resolution practices. It also develops conflict prevention practices.

Summary of findings from peer mediator questionnaires

Table Three below shows a summary of the responses relating to Circle Time and who the pupils felt make the best mediators. The first column shows the question, the second the range of responses and the third the number of peer mediators who made a particular response as a percentage of the total responses

Table Three: Circle Time and who make the best mediators?

Question	Response	% response
Do you do Circle Time in your school?	Yes	100%
Do teachers make good mediators?	Yes	68%
	No	24%
	Don't know	8%
Do lunchtime supervisors make good mediators?	Yes	24%
	No	60%
	Don't know	16%
Do parents / carers make good mediators?	Yes	44%
	No	28%
	Don't know	28%
Do children make good mediators?	Yes	100%

The responses to the first question: Do you do Circle Time in your school? correlates with what the teachers said in their group interview, that Circle Time is an important aspect of life in these schools.

The questions about who make good mediators are revealing. All mediators from these successfully mediating schools felt that children are the best mediators, with 68% of them feeling that teachers are good mediators. Only 24%, however, felt that lunchtime supervisors make good mediators. The pupils are perceptive in the reasons that they give for this, with issues of training and power featuring in many of their responses.

The majority of pupil mediators felt that teachers in their school make good mediators. One mediator wrote that “teachers make good mediators because they are trained properly,” and that they “listen to you” as “sensible good listeners.” These teachers “usually sort out problems successfully and don’t take sides.” Not all of the mediators, however, felt this way. One simply stated that “teachers don’t mediate at our school,” with another suggesting that this is because “they have not been trained.” Reasons why teachers make poor mediators include “because they take sides” and “because they solve the problem by shouting at them and sending them to a different class.” The powerful and punitive part of the class teachers’ role is thus seen as a barrier to mediation, even in these schools, by some of the mediators.

Mediator's views about the mediation role of lunchtime supervisors echo the more negative views expressed about teachers. One mediator states "they don't mediate" with another raising the issue of training "our lunchtime supervisors haven't been trained yet, but will be later in the year." The punitive aspect of their role is highlighted as a barrier "they do the same as teachers (shout)" and "they mostly give detentions." Other comments perhaps reflect lunchtime supervisors' lack of status, low pay, difficult working conditions and lack of training and support in these areas:

"I don't think that lunchtime supervisors make good mediators because they are different kind of people."

"No, they don't. First thing is they are not trained, second thing is that they don't sort out problems – they chat."

"No, whenever we tell them there's something wrong they just ignore it."

Mediator's perceptions of the staff who care for them at lunchtimes are clearly a cause for concern. Lunchtime supervisors look after children for at least an hour every day in an unstructured environment where conflict can easily break out between peers. It seems counter-productive to train teachers and children in conflict resolution techniques if lunchtime supervisors are not equally trained in ways of helping create peaceful playtimes. Even in these successfully mediating schools, working with lunchtime supervisors could lead to a general improvement in children's experiences of conflict at lunchtime.

These peer mediators felt that parents do make good mediators, particularly when home culture matches that of the mediation service "they teach us not to do things that the mediators advise us not to do (name-calling, swearing, interrupting etc.)." Parents were seen as caring and understanding, although some of the respondents felt that parents do not make good mediators because, like teachers, they have a punitive role "no, because they ground us," "sometimes, but they shout at you." One mediator sums this up with a perceptive "well, some parents do, but some don't, so it's a maybe."

There was no equivalence, however, in the mediator's views about whether children make good mediators. Again, they relate this to issues of training and power:

“Yes, because children have been taught what to do.”

“Yes, children don’t ignore arguments and fights, and they are trained.”

“Yes, they help and don’t take sides, don’t shout, don’t tell other people, and don’t tell them what to do.”

“Yes, because we won’t take sides, only children mediate.”

This last comment can either be taken as a naïve understanding of mediation, or as a perceptive commentary on the nature of power relations in mediation. For mediation to be a truly empowering process, it could be argued, there needs to be an equalising of power imbalances, not just between the child disputants, but also between the mediator(s) and the disputants. In other words, it must not matter (overtly) to the mediator whether or not the disputants reach a resolution. If the mediator has a stake in the resolution of the conflict (and teachers often do) then s/he cannot be sufficiently disinterested to be truly impartiality. This is perhaps the strongest message to emerge from what these mediators say about the proper role of mediation in school, and who make the best mediators. One mediator puts it simply “children make good mediators because they can mediate better than adults,” whilst another states that “children prefer to talk to other children,” and another that “children make good mediators because they know how other children feel.” The mediators also reflect on the ways that the role of the mediator has enabled them to develop maturity beyond that of their peer group “it makes us more grown up,” and “once they (children) are mediators they become sensible and kind.” These schools have evidently had a high degree of success in empowering these pupils as genuine resolvers of playground conflict. This enhanced role in school appears, in turn, to have impacted on the mediators’ self-esteem.

Table Four: Types of dispute coming to mediation

what kinds of things do you mediate about?	no of responses
Name-calling and swearing	15
Arguments	11
Fights	9
Friends falling out	6
Bullying	5
Accidents	2
Problems	1

Football	1
Hopscotch	1

The findings shown above in Table Four correlate with findings from elsewhere (e.g. Cremin 2000) about the most common types of disputes to come to mediation. Once again, it is the most subtle, indirect and psychological forms of conflict and bullying that appear the most amenable to the mediation process. Interestingly, these forms of conflict and bullying involve language, suggesting that pupils who access these services see language as both a means of generating harm and of bringing about redemption. Perhaps therein lies a clue as to the most effective use of peer mediation in schools.

Table Five: Negative aspects of mediation

what are the bad things about mediation?	no of responses
Disputants breaking rules and being rude	10
Friends not accepting the role	4
There aren't any	3
Missing playtime	3
Safety worries	2
Missing football	1
Problems in the team	1

Table Five shows that the negative aspects of mediation mentioned by these mediators centre mainly around managing their relationships with peers, given their changed role. This extends to both dealing with pupils who refuse to accept their authority within the mediation process, and to dealing with friends who can be slightly resentful, especially as the choosing of mediators is often a competitive process, where not everyone who wants to become a mediator can do so. Schools embarking on peer mediation would do well to take account of these issues.

Given these difficulties, however, the mediators felt that peer mediation has made a strong contribution to their schools. Table Six summarises the perceived benefits:

Table six: Benefits for schools of peer mediation

how has mediation helped your school?	no of responses
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It is a friendlier, happier place	15
Less arguments	3
Reduced bullying	3
Teachers and lunchtime supervisors freed	2

It is encouraging to see that the mediators focus on positive proactive reasons for mediation (school as a friendlier, happier place) rather than negative, reactive ones (reduced bullying). This would imply that these mediators have a clear understanding of mediation as part of a whole-school approach towards social and emotional well being. These successful schools have thus been able to transmit their core values to the mediators. Perhaps this, as much as anything else, gives a clue as to why these schemes have been successful.

Conclusion

Peer mediation schemes, then, need to be about more than tokenism if they are to thrive and last over months and years. They need to be founded on genuine empowerment of young people, and a belief that disputants, with the support of peer mediators, really are best equipped to resolve their own conflicts. What is more, this belief system needs to be backed up with resources and a commitment to making peer mediation work. This will entail time, money and training. It will also involve all adults and children in the school community revisiting attitudes and behaviour relating to power and control. Peer mediation is not an easy option. It is not about abandoning a group of pupils to manage as best they can in the turmoil of playground life. It is about a careful and well-managed strategy for enabling young people to take a greater degree of responsibility over their own lives and relationships, with the full support of a dedicated staff team. The ability to resolve conflict without resorting to violence is fundamental to survival as never before, as recent world events have shown. It is difficult to argue that there are more important things that children need to learn as we move into the 21st century

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