The Effects of Peer Mediation Programs on School Violence

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School violence is a major problem confronting educators in America. Regardless of efforts made to curb trends of violence, the statistics are still startling. In 2007, 36% of high school students had been in a physical fight in the past twelve months, and 18% had carried a weapon in the past 30 days (CDC, 2008, as cited in McWirth & McWirth, 2010). In an effort to rid bad behavior, teachers and administrators often take punitive measures such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, detentions, and admittance to alternative schools. However, few professionals agree that reactive responses to aggressive behavior teach appropriate behavior or that they are effective in the long term (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002).

Schools aim to create an environment conducive to learning and to prepare students to be good citizens for their future roles in society (Lane & McWirth, 1992). However, too often school discipline practices fail to teach effective conflict resolution skills that are essential for functioning in life after high school. Research has shown that the implementation of punishment, especially when it is used inconsistently and in the absence of other positive strategies, is ineffective (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002). Many schools have begun to implement peer mediation programs as a positive alternative to punishment (Lane & McWirth, 1992).

Peer mediation has be defined in different ways throughout the literature. However, a definition that resonates with the majority of the literature was written by Theberge and Karan (2004). They defined peer mediation as “a process in which students that have been taught a structured, step-by-step model assist others [students] to peacefully negotiate solutions to their interpersonal conflicts (p. 284).
In a review of the literature on peer mediation programs, researchers have found that student behavior and school discipline problems improve as a result of peer mediation (Lane & McWirther, 1992), schools see a reduction in the number of conflicts referred to teachers and administrators, and a reduction in the number of school suspensions (Smith et. al., 2002). Peer mediation programs promote conflict resolution skills, which increase assertiveness strategies that aggressive children often lack (Smith et. al., 2002). Other benefits researchers have found include the promotion of a safer school climate, enhanced interpersonal skills among participants, and empowerment of students to resolve their own disputes (Day-Vines, Day-Hairston, Carruthers, & Wall, 1996).

Advocates for peer mediation programs believe that using children to help other children is a mutually beneficial way to resolve conflicts between children (Humphries, 1999; Lane & McWirther, 1992). These advocates have also discussed in the literature the importance of children being role models, and listed benefits such as improved student behavior, increased peer status, academic improvement, enhanced leadership skills, higher self-esteem, and better resolution of problems at school and at home.

Based on the literature, peer mediation programs are best utilized in conjunction with traditional means of discipline (Lane & McWirther, 1992). Although programs may differ in origin, philosophy, and design, their basic goal is to help students manage interpersonal conflicts constructively (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). The design may be based on a total school model, in which all students in the school are taught conflict resolution strategies and have the opportunity to function as mediators; an elective course model, in which a mini-course on mediation is taught within a class curriculum, such as social studies or health; or a student
club model, in which students are selected from the entire student body and meet at a time and place outside of their regular school day (Lupton-Smith, Carruthers, Flythe, & Goettee, 1996).

All three designs have been found to be effective (Lupton-Smith et. al., 1996; Stevahn et. al., 2002), although the total school model is thought to be most effective (Lupton-Smith et. al., 1996). There are stages that a school must follow when implementing a peer mediation program. Research has shown that programs that are well organized and have the support of the whole school will be most effective (Cremin, 2002). The stages include the introductory stage, which involves obtaining support from the school’s administration, staff, students, parents, and community; the training stage, which involves training peer mediators in conflict resolution skills; and the operational stage, which involves promotion and maintenance of the program, ongoing support and training for school staff, students, and mediators, and an evaluation of the program’s effectiveness (Lupton-Smith et. al., 1996).

Training of mediators is a crucial element of peer mediation programs. Many programs have different ways of training, but the literature shows many common themes. They all teach mediators steps to take to resolve a conflict. An example of a well-developed training sequence was discussed in an article by Stevahn et. al. (2002). There were six specific steps they learned for how to negotiate a conflict: (a) describing what one wants, (b) describing how one feels, (c) describing the underlying reasons for one’s desires and feelings, (d) reversing perspectives, (e) inventing at least three optional agreements to maximize joint outcomes, and (f) reaching an agreement and shaking hands. They also learn a four-step mediation procedure that included (a) ending hostilities between disputants, (b) ensuring that disputants are committed to mediation,
(c) facilitating negotiation between disputants, and (d) formalizing the negotiated agreement by
writing a contract.

Having a simple step model for mediators to follow is crucial to ensure that mediation is
carried out effectively. Johnson et. al. (1996) even proposed making a cue-card of steps that
mediators can carry with them when they mediate conflicts, especially with elementary students.
When steps are easy to remember, children are more likely to teach them to others. In the study
conducted by Stevahn et. al. (2002) one student mediator said that she found the steps so easy
and useful that she taught them to her siblings so that they could work through their conflicts at
home.

Another important aspect of peer mediation that is discussed in the literature is the
importance of diversity in the recruitment of mediators. Day-Vines, Day-Hairston, Carruthers, &
Wall (1996) suggested that peer mediation not only reduces conflict, but has the potential to
promote intercultural sensitivity among participants by including diverse segments of the student
population as mediators, stimulate in mediators an openness and appreciation of differences, and
make the mediation program more responsive to the needs of the entire student body.

Day-Vines et. al. (1996) proposed that program coordinators must be intentional in their
selection of mediators in order to select a representative sample. To obtain a diverse sample,
mediator candidates must be recruited through individual solicitation of underrepresented
populations. Day-Vines et. al. (1996) suggested that students who do not normally become
involved in school functions may not respond to application forms, fliers, posters, and
announcements. Coordinators of peer mediation programs will have to recruit some participants
individually if they want a truly diverse group of students.
Another group of students that researchers have found is beneficial to include are students deemed to be “at-risk” (Day-Vines et. al., 1996; Lane & McWirther, 1992). They found that at-risk students who directly participated in the program developed more “prosocial” attitudes towards conflict. Researchers noted that these students have leadership skills that can be positively re-channeled. Peer mediation provides an positive outlet for them and an opportunity to be leaders and role-models for their peers.

Peer mediation programs have been in schools for many years now, yet there is still a dearth of strong empirical evidence on its effectiveness in reducing school violence (Stevahn et. al., 2002). It has strong face validity and plenty of testimonials from schools touting its impact on their school. However, this is not enough to prove that peer mediation is any better than traditional discipline or other forms of alternatives to punishment. Very few studies have compared peer mediation to other forms of discipline in well-controlled studies.

**Statement of the Problem**

As noted in the review of the literature, peer mediation programs have been implemented in some schools as a preventive measure against aggressive behavior, which often makes it difficult for students to learn (Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, & Rehfuss, 2007). The belief is that these programs will help students learn to manage interpersonal conflicts constructively, and in doing so, make the school safer and more conducive to learning. However, despite the abundance of descriptive literature and curriculum materials available, most programs are not linked to conflict-resolution theory and have not been empirically validated (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). Researchers note that while peer mediation programs have gained popularity
and have a considerable amount of face validity, most of the research has relied on anecdotal evidence (Theberge & Karan, 2004).

It is imperative that more research is conducted to determine the effectiveness of peer mediation programs in order for it to keep being used in schools. Schools today are very data-driven and programs that are not empirically validated may not continue to be funded. As Gerber & Terry-Day (1999) noted, “unless [peer mediation] receives convincing empirical support, its demise is predictable” (p. 171). It is hypothesized that in schools that have an established peer mediation program, there will be fewer incidences of violence and fewer discipline referrals.

**Purpose of the Proposed Study**

The purpose of the proposed study is to evaluate the difference in levels of school violence among high schools with peer mediation programs and high schools without peer mediation programs. The study would address the following question: Do peer mediation programs have a positive, negative, or no effect on incidents of school violence?

**The Research Design**

A quantitative, experimental design will be used to measure the effects of peer mediation programs on the number of incidents of school violence and discipline referrals at high schools surveyed. A posttest-only control group design will be used. Both schools with peer mediation and without peer mediation will participate in the study. The experimental group will be the schools with peer mediation programs in place. The intervention is the peer mediation program. The posttest will be the instruments (Conflict Resolution Scale, Principal/Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence) described in the instruments section. The control group will be the schools
without peer mediation programs. No intervention will be provided for the control group. The control group will receive the same posttest (instruments) as the experimental group.

**Sampling Plan**

This study will be a cross-sectional study. The sampling method used will be purposive sampling. It would not be feasible to use random sampling because of the need to sample schools with specific characteristics. It is necessary to select schools that have very similar peer mediation programs in order to yield valid results. The researchers will use their knowledge of the school system and peer mediation programs to select schools appropriate for the study.

Participants will be recruited through phone calls, emails, and/or personal meetings with administrators from public high schools in central Indiana, with a goal of surveying at least 10 high schools, 5 with peer mediation programs in place and 5 without peer mediation programs in place. High schools have been chosen for the population of study in this proposal because the majority of the literature on peer mediation has focused on elementary and middle school levels (Johnson et. al., 1996; Lane & McWirther, 1992; Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, & Rehfuss, 2007; Smith et. al., 2002; and Theberge & Karan, 2004). A description of the study will be given to each school, including the purpose of the research, the instruments to be used, and the plan for confidentiality of results. This description is further explained in the procedure section.

**Instrumentation**

**Conflict Resolution Scale.** This scale consists of a 25-item needs assessment (Conflict Resolution Scale, Part 1) developed by Smith et. al. (2002) to measure frequency of conflict (including aggression), levels of disciplinary interventions, conflict resolution styles, outside influences, need for help in solving problems, effect of poor communication on conflicts, and
group aggression (e.g., “When I have an argument with someone, we end up in a fight”). The researchers estimated Cronbach's alphas for each subscale; they ranged from .45 (outside influences) to .89 (group aggression). This instrument is important because it elicits information from the students themselves on how they are using the conflict resolution skills to prevent violence.

**Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence.** This survey, developed by the U.S. Department of Education (1998), was a one-time national study of 1200 principals to measure the levels of school violence in the United States. The survey asks principals to report the number of violent incidents (i.e., physical attack or fight with a weapon, physical attack or fight without a weapon, sexual battery, suicide, theft/larceny, etc.) that occurred throughout the school year. The survey also asks about the types of discipline in place at the school and what types of programs or curriculum they have in place to prevent violence.

This survey has not been evaluated for reliability or validity. However, this instrument is important because it provides data on exactly how many violent incidents occurred throughout the year. This data will be used to determine if there is a correlation between peer mediation programs and lower rates of violence in schools.

**Procedure**

Once participants have agreed to discuss the possibility of research being conducted on their school, a meeting will be set up with the principal or other administrator at the beginning of the school year (August and September) to discuss the logistics of the study. A packet of information will be compiled for the school that will include a description of the characteristics of an effective peer mediation program, the instruments being used, a statement of
confidentiality, and information about the estimated length of time to administer instruments and analyze data. The team of researchers will be the ones attending these meetings.

The description of characteristics of an effective peer mediation program will be used to assess the effectiveness of the schools’ programs that are already in place. In order to get balanced results, the programs in place should be similar. The characteristics would include (a) a training sequence that teaches both students and staff conflict resolution skills that is similar to the sequence described by Stevahn et. al. (2002), (b) a simple step model for mediators to follow when mediating conflicts and a way for students to remember the steps, such as cue cards as described by Johnson et. al. (1996), (c) support from administration about the importance of the program, (d) a system of evaluation of the program, and (e) a plan for diversity that involves choosing mediators that represent the demographic distribution of the school.

The participants (schools surveyed) in the study would also need to have similar characteristics in order for the results to be valid. The characteristics would include (a) schools must be public schools (i.e. not private or charter schools), (b) schools in suburban settings (i.e. not inner-city schools), (c) an ethnic minority population of at least 10 to 20% of the school population, (d) school administration indicates a desire to learn about effective violence prevention strategies to implement in their school.

The statement of confidentiality would ensure the school that the researchers will not include any names of schools or school districts in the research. Additionally, no student, teacher or administrator names will be used. The instruments (Conflict Resolution Scale and Principal/Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence) would be administered at the end of the school year (April to May). This is to ensure the most accurate data on school violence. The principal
investigator will coordinate with the administrator of each school to determine a plan for administering the Conflict Resolution Scale (Smith et. al., 2002).

Ideally, this assessment would be conducted electronically. In this case, the school would need to come up with a plan to get all of the students into a computer lab to take the assessment at some time between April and May. If the school did not want to take the assessment electronically, the researchers would need to provide paper copies of the assessment and work with the administrator to find a convenient time to administer to assessment.

The Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) would need to be completed by the principal at the end of the school year as well. In order to get the most accurate information, the principal investigator would ask the principal to wait until after the last day of school to take the survey. This way, every incidence of violence that occurred during the school year would be accounted for. The reason for using including assessments for both students and the administrator is to gain a complete picture of the rates of violence and aggression at the school.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of the study include studying only schools in Indiana. It may be difficult to generalize the results to other populations within other states in the United States. The design of studying both schools that have mediation programs and schools that do not could be problematic because they were not randomly selected. Schools have different discipline techniques that may skew the results. For example, some schools may give in-school suspensions for more “minor” incidents such as repeated disruptive behavior in class, whereas some schools may save in-school suspensions for violent conflicts between students.
The “Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence” may not be able to fully separate discipline practices such as this, which may make some schools appear to have more discipline problems than others. The peer mediation programs in each school may also be different. Even with the stated characteristics of desired peer mediation programs, it is difficult to control that they are in fact similar enough to produce valid results. For example, two schools may both have similar training sequences, but one may be delivered more effectively than the other. Despite these limitations, this study has potential to yield important information to add to the literature.

**Expected Results**

The expected results of this study would show that there is a correlation between peer mediation programs and school violence. This study would likely show results consistent with the literature that implementing peer mediation programs leads to a reduction in rates of school violence. Schools that already had peer mediation programs in place would likely show a lower rate of violence than schools without a peer mediation program in place.

The results of this study would directly benefit the schools participating in the study in the future. They will be able to use the data gathered to determine if what they are doing is working or if they need to try something else. If expected results are found, the schools without peer mediation programs and with high rates of violence would be given literature on peer mediation programs and how they could implement that in their school. This study has the potential to benefit any school looking to reduce rates of violence. All schools must have a school safety plan. A peer mediation program would supplement that plan nicely and provide solid data to prove its effectiveness in the school.
The results of this study would also benefit school counselors. School counselors have standards for guidance that they are supposed to be meeting every year with their students. This includes standards for conflict resolution. It is considered best practice for school counselors to address these standards comprehensively with every student in the school. Peer mediation would be an ideal way to impact all students with conflict resolution skills.

Additionally, the results of this study would benefit the field of school counseling. There is a need for more research on peer mediation programs, especially at the high school level. This study would add to the literature base and provide researchers and practitioners with more knowledge on how peer mediation effects rates of violence in schools.

**Qualifications**

The principal investigator has a strong background in working in the school system that has provided her with knowledge and insight that would make this study successful. The principal investigator is currently an intern at a middle school and also has counseling and guidance experience at the elementary and high school level. The principal investigator has taught students about conflict resolution skills and has observed the need for a more comprehensive program to put these skills into practice. The prospective advisor would be Dr. Alexander. She is the director of the school counseling program at Ball State University and has many years of experience in working with the school system and researching school counseling issues.

**Summary**

This study would aim to determine the effects of peer mediation programs on rates of school violence. The literature suggests that peer mediation programs reduce rates of violence
and have many benefits for schools including increased knowledge of conflict resolutions skills, increased self-esteem, increased academic performance, and a more positive school climate. The methodology in many previous studies has been weak, oftentimes based on anecdotal evidence or very small samples.

This study aims to improve some of those weaknesses. It is expected that the results of this study would be consistent, but add to the literature and find that peer mediation programs reduce the level of violence. This study would benefit schools and school counselors, while also contributing to the professional conversation on alternative forms of discipline in schools.
References


