Addressing peer mediation: conflict resolution in schools

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Addressing peer mediation: conflict resolution in schools

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to review existing literature and research on peer mediation in schools. A critical review is necessary due to the increasing popularity of peer mediation programs despite limited empirical evidence to support their usage. Examining the strengths and weaknesses of previous research is an important part of establishing program effectiveness and overcoming barriers to successful implementation. A critique of the research and implications for future research are also provided.

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ADDRESSING PEER MEDIATION:
CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN SCHOOLS

A Research Paper
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Masters of Arts

Amy Junkermeier
University of Northern Iowa
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Over the past decade, acts of aggression and teacher time spent managing disruptive behavior has increased dramatically (Bear, Webster-Stratton, Furlong, & Rhee, 2000). While conflict occurs frequently in schools, many children don’t possess the skills necessary to manage conflict constructively. In fact, research (i.e., Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992) suggests that untrained students primarily resolve conflict with destructive strategies such as verbal threats or force.

As it becomes more difficult to guarantee the safety and classroom management of schools, the need for programs to help students manage conflict constructively increases. There are many types of conflict resolution programs. A common type is the peer mediation program. Peer mediation is a program that empowers students to manage their own conflict through training in problem solving and negotiation. Accordingly, Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Acikgoz (1994) suggested that “if all students learn to regulate their own conflict behavior, the quality of life in schools would improve, and teachers would have more time and energy to instruct” (p.804).

Importance of the Review

The purpose of this paper is to review existing literature and research on peer mediation in schools. A critical review is necessary due to the increasing popularity of peer mediation programs despite limited empirical evidence to support their usage. Examining the strengths and weaknesses of previous research is an important part of establishing program effectiveness and overcoming barriers to successful
implementation. A critique of the research and implications for future research are also provided.

Definition of Terms

Conflict

"A disagreement or difference of opinion" (Winston, 1996, p.16) which occurs whenever incompatible activities exist (Deutsch, 1973).

Competition

When an individual works against other individuals to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

Disputant

Individual involved in conflict or disagreement.

Negotiation

Process in which disputants develop strategies for agreement.

Distributive negotiation

Negotiation aimed at maximizing one's own gains at the expense others (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

Integrative negotiation

Negotiation focused on maximizing the mutual gain of all parties involved.

Mediation

A structured process in which a neutral and impartial third party assists two or more people in reaching an acceptable agreement.

Resolution

Agreement to solve a problem.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of the literature provides background information about peer mediation, a form of conflict resolution in schools. The review is organized in the following sections: a) origin/history, b) understanding peer mediation, c) peer mediator skills, d) peer mediation uniqueness, e) importance of peer mediation programs, f) learning conflict resolution, g) empowering students to help each other, h) establishing a cooperative context, i) types of peer mediation, j) types of school conflict, k) training/program implementation, l) evaluation, m) research support for peer mediation, n) critique of research, o) summary of research, p) implications for future research, and q) implications to school psychology.

Origin/History

Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs originated from researchers in the field of conflict resolution, advocates of nonviolence, anti-nuclear war activists, and legal professionals (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). The Quakers were the first to establish conflict resolution in 1972 when they began the Children’s Creative Response to Conflict project in New York City in an attempt to teach all children the values of nonviolence and cooperation (Maxwell, 1989). Subsequently, anti-nuclear war activists implemented the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program in 1985. The program included a 10-unit curriculum on conflict resolution and 20 hours of training in peer mediation (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). The legal profession also became involved as part of President Carter’s
Neighborhood Justice Center initiative in the 1980s. Community mediation centers were established to help community members resolve their differences through mediation, rather than litigation (Maxwell, 1989). Two of the original peer mediation programs were the San Francisco Community Boards Conflict Manager's Program and the School Mediators' Alternative Resolution Team (SMART).

Moreover, the Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) was developed to promote peace in education by teaching resolution skills. The establishment of NAME, the National Association of Mediation in Education also advanced the field of mediation by serving as a clearinghouse for information (Davis & Porter, 1985). Over the past decade there has been a large increase in the number of peer mediation programs employed in schools. In fact, the National Association of Mediation in Education estimated that peer mediation and conflict resolution programs increased from 2,000 programs in 1992 to 8,000 programs in 1994 (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

Because of the significant increase in peer mediation programs, it is important that researchers evaluate these programs in order to improve their effectiveness. Unfortunately, many programs are initiated on insights rather than through empirical evidence. In fact, Johnson and Johnson (1996b) warned that many schools are “engaging in well-intentioned efforts without any evidence that the programs will work” (p.12). Clearly, more research is necessary before peer mediation programs increase in prevalence.

Understanding Peer Mediation

Peer mediation is currently one of the most popular conflict resolution programs implemented in schools. While traditional methods of discipline focus on adult control,
peer mediation encourages collaboration, creativity, and problem solving and provides a structured forum for students to manage their own conflict (Maxwell, 1989). Peer mediation is a formal procedure of negotiation in which an impartial third party assists disputants in reaching a resolution that is acceptable to both parties (Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). Peer mediators help peers solve problems by listening to their understanding of a situation, clarifying issues, and assisting in the problem-solving process by facilitating negotiation (Cutrona & Guerin, 1994).

While conflict resolution is usually implemented as a curriculum to provide training to an entire class or school, peer mediation is a student-owned program in which a few selected students mediate disputes among their peers (Powell, McClain, & Halasyamani, 1995). More advanced peer mediation programs focus on training all students in mediation skills, and mediators rotate daily or weekly in order to provide an opportunity for all students to practice mediation.

**Peer Mediator Skills**

Peer mediation programs teach students negotiation skills. Conflict can be managed through integrative (win-win) or distributive (win-lose) approaches. Individuals who use distributive approaches maximize their own gain at the expense of others. As a result, this strategy often leads to deception, threat, coercion, and competitiveness (Dudley, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996). In contrast, integrative negotiations encourage individuals to reach a mutually acceptable agreement through open communication, trust, cooperation, and problem solving (Dudley, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996).

Peer mediators help disputants solve conflict constructively by facilitating the negotiation process and encouraging disputants to use integrative strategies (win-win). To
assist students in this process, Johnson and Johnson (1994) proposed that all students attempt to use the following negotiation procedure when they encounter conflict:

2. State how you feel.
3. State the reasons for your wants and feelings.
4. Summarize your understanding of what the other person wants, how the other person feels, and the reasons underlying both.
5. Invent three optional plans to resolve conflict.
6. Choose one and shake hands" (p.128).

When students can't negotiate in constructive ways on their own, peer mediators should be available to assist in the process. A major goal of mediation is to remove disputants from dysfunctional conflict and encourage individuals to listen to one another and understand other's perspectives while working cooperatively (Burrell & Vogl, 1990). Accordingly, Davis and Salem (1985) suggested that successful mediators 1) "separate the people from the problem, 2) focus on interests, not positions, 3) invent options for mutual gains, and 4) agree upon objective criteria" (p.35-36).

**Peer Mediation Uniqueness**

Peer mediation is different from other social emotional training programs in that it is focused "specifically on conflict as a social encounter" (Jones & Bodtker, p.111). The purpose of peer mediation and conflict resolution training is not for students to suppress conflict but to learn to deal with conflict in innovative ways (Davis & Salem, 1985). Because peer mediation is a voluntary process, students are not required to participate in mediation when they encounter conflict. Accordingly, peer mediators should not "tattle,
scold, demand, pass judgment, or force themselves on others” (Cahoon 1988, p.94).
Mediators serve as guides to the communication process and are to remain neutral and impartial. In this way, peer mediators aren’t dictating solutions or persuading students to use a particular approach. Instead, they help students think of their own ways to solve problems.

**Importance of Peer Mediation Programs**

There are many potential advantages of peer mediation. By teaching all students conflict resolution skills and providing peer mediators when extra assistance is necessary, schools promote a discipline system that empowers students to regulate and control their own behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). When students self-advocate for their own decisions, increased responsibility, self-esteem, and self-discipline result (Maxwell, 1989). Through peer mediation, peers serve as powerful role models who help reinforce norms of appropriate behavior and promote alternatives to negative behavior (Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

**Learning Conflict Resolution**

“When and how children learn to manage conflict is not well understood” (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Acikgoz, 1994, p.803). Many assume children learn these skills, but this assumption may not be justified. Although conflict is unavoidable, and every student faces some type of conflict daily; little is done in school to prepare children for dealing with these challenges (Davis & Salem, 1985). Rather than ignoring conflict, educators need to admit that conflict exists, and teach students ways to manage conflict constructively. Accordingly, Davis and Salem (1985) suggest that students who
“recognize the interests of both others and themselves and communicate openly about these desires are able to understand the creative potential of conflict” (p.23-24).

Although schools want students to act responsibly and independently, most rely on school authorities to handle conflict, rather than allowing students to negotiate and solve their own problems. In an attempt to address discipline problems, schools often implement school-wide programs that emphasize teacher-administrated external rewards and punishments to control behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 1996c). Consequently, students learn that adults are needed to resolve disputes. However, Johnson and Johnson (1996c) asserted that when schools provide opportunities for students to regulate their own and peer’s behavior, the “more autonomous and socially competent they become” (p.323).

Accordingly, Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Burnett (1992) stated that “if students are to learn how to regulate their behavior, they must have opportunities to make decisions regarding how they behave and follow through on the decision made” (p.10). Nevertheless, many educators have little training in teaching and encouraging students to manage conflict constructively and rely on authoritarian methods to gain student compliance (Lindsay, 1998). Further, Opotow (1991) suggested that adults who handle conflict with traditional, punitive methods make a “forceful statement of school regulations that reinforces the idea that conflict is about power, threat, and coercion” (p.426). When students are involved in the problem solving process, they are more likely to perceive outcomes as fair and are more likely to perceive outcomes as unfair when adults handle conflict (Opotow, 1991).
Empowering Students to Help Each Other

Because many students perceive adults as unfair or ineffective when dealing with student conflict, it is important that schools empower students to help each other manage conflict constructively. For example, Opotow (1991) studied the effects of conflict with inner city seventh graders. Results indicated that although conflict had a negative impact on students (reduced self-esteem, decreased attendance, lower academic achievement), only 2 of 40 students reported discussing conflict with a school adult. In fact, students described interactions with adults as "one-way communication, an interrogation, or lecture, but not as an exchange" (p.428). Further, students suggested that once conflict was discussed with adults "it was out of their hands and the outcome was unpredictable" (p.428). Fatum and Hoyle (1996) found similar results when they interviewed adolescents at a suburban middle school about adult assistance during conflict. Adolescents responded by saying that adults were of no help in situations involving their peers, and the adolescents who did involve adults were regarded negatively by peers.

Establishing a Cooperative Context

Schools can support the management of conflict in constructive ways by encouraging cooperative learning environments. In a cooperative context, conflicts are defined as mutual problems to be solved in ways that benefit everyone, and individuals recognize the needs of all parties involved (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Consequently, relationships are maintained by open communication, trust, and perspective taking (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). In a competitive environment, on the other hand, individuals seek personal gain without regard to the negative effects their actions may
have on others. As a result, competitive environments often lead to mistrust, ineffective communication, and misconceptions of others (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

Cooperation is a vital component of conflict resolution; nevertheless, most schools are dominated by competition in which individuals work against one another to achieve personal gain (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). In fact; Johnson and Johnson (1996a) warned that “when conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are implemented in an existing competitive, individualistic context, the effectiveness of the programs are severely compromised” (p.472). Clearly, it is counterproductive to implement a program that emphasizes mutual gain in a context that supports competition for scarce reward (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Therefore, it is important for schools to establish a cooperative context by utilizing a variety of cooperatively learning activities.

Types of Peer Mediation

Peer mediation programs are classified as either cadre or total student body approaches (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). A small, select number of students participate in the cadre approach (i.e. Community Boards of San Francisco Conflict Managers Program) which is based on the assumption that “a few specially trained students can defuse and constructively resolve interpersonal conflicts among students” (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson, 1995, p.674). Cadre approaches are usually less expensive and time consuming and occur in a one or two day workshop.

In contrast, total student body approaches (i.e. Johason & Johnson’s Teaching Students to Be Peacemaker’s Program and Children’s Creative Response to Conflict) focus on training every student how to manage conflict constructively and provide every student the opportunity to function as a mediator (Johnson, Johnson, Mitchell, Cotton,
Harris, & Lousion, 1996). Total student body approaches are based on the assumption that every student needs to learn how to negotiate effectively, and a transformed school culture (one that fosters cooperation and supports mediation) is necessary for success (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson, 1995). Peer mediators in total student body approaches are rotated daily or weekly until everyone in a class has an opportunity to practice mediation. In order to train an entire student body, these approaches require more time, funding, and commitment.

Although teaching all students to serve as mediators is ideal, Smith, Carruthers, Flythe, Goettee, and Modest (1996) suggested that the total student body approach is beyond most school's ability due to lack of time, commitment, and funding; therefore, they recommend that schools start small (with cadre approaches) while “striving for the ideal student body model” (p.383).

Types of School Conflict

Research (i.e., Araki, 1990; Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Acikgoz, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, & Magnuson, 1995) indicates that common conflicts in school include: verbal harassment, gossip and rumors, access to or possession of resources, jealousy, physical fights, academic work conflicts, turn-taking, invasion of privacy, and threatening non-verbal communication. One drawback of research in this area is that studies only account for conflicts that are brought to mediation, and when students were asked to recall conflicts over a long period of time, only the most severe cases were recalled (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).
Training/Program Implementation

Obtaining Support

While new school programs are often quickly initiated, they are also easily neglected when new school issues surface (Lindsay, 1998). Therefore, programs that are incorporated into the curriculum and discipline system are more likely to persist in comparison to add-on or stand-alone programs (Lindsay, 1998). Furthermore, Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, and Laginski (1997) asserted, “new programs are not widely adopted or maintained unless they increase achievement and are integrated into the teaching of regular subject matter” (p.303).

Because obtaining support from the school’s administration, staff, students, parents, and community is an essential determinant of the success of a peer mediation program, coordinators should spend a large amount of their time encouraging participation and building awareness. Accordingly, Lindsay (1998) recommended that peer mediation coordinators involve the entire community, recruit dedicated individuals, design programs to meet the needs of both at-risk and average students, maintain administrator support, and allocate ample time for staff to prepare for programming. Unfortunately, many schools assume that a few hours of training will “fix” school problems and consequently do not spend adequate time in preparation and implementation (Johnson & Johnson, 1996b).

Furthermore, Kelder, Orpinas, McAlister, Frankowski, Parcel, and Friday (1996) suggested that schools conduct focus groups to better accommodate student needs and modify programs according to students’ perceptions. Humphries (1999) suggested that because mediators often express concern about losing friendships and being antagonized
by peers, educators should discuss the objectives of peer mediation and the roles of the peer mediator to the entire student body in order to improve students’ understanding and support for the mediation process. This idea is supported by Gentry and Benenson (1993) who reported greater peer mediator satisfaction when peers understood the mediator’s role. Another suggestion for continued support is providing more children with mediation training and rotating peer mediators throughout the school year (Humphries, 1999).

Clearly, the success or failure of peer mediation program is dependent on support from administrators and school staff (Carruthers, Sweeney, Kmita, & Harris, 1996). Teachers with a favorable attitude toward conflict resolution programs are more likely to implement the program in their classrooms (Spano, 1996). Because many add-on programs are perceived by teachers as overwhelming and time consuming, Spano (1996) recommended assessing teachers’ attitudes before implementation in order to determine whether the “district is actually ready to train teachers to implement the program” (p.44).

Needs Assessment

Because not every school may need a peer mediation program, educators need to conduct a needs assessment to determine each school’s unique needs. For example, educators should assess where and why the program is needed, where to obtain funding, and what types of barriers may be present (Burrell & Vogl, 1990). Likewise, Cutrona and Guerin (1994) also suggested that schools ask the following questions before implementation:

1. "What types of conflict occur most frequently?"
2. Where do most conflicts occur?
3. Who is responsible for handling school related conflict?
4. How much time is spent on conflict related matters?
5. How effective is the system’s current approach to resolving conflict?” (p.99).

After determining needs, Cutrona and Guerin (1994) suggest that planning include:
1. “Program goals and objectives: What types of conflict are appropriate to mediate?
2. Obstacles: What constraints will keep the program from being successful?
3. Staffing: Who will coordinate/participate in the program?
4. Funding: How much will it cost to implement? How will the school obtain funding?
5. Assistance: Can the school implement on its own or is a consultant necessary?” (p.99).

Mediator Selection

Peer mediators are selected through self, peer, or teacher nomination. The number of students who participate in programming varies. Training ranges between 10 and 20 hours (Smith, Carruthers, Flythe, Goettee, & Modest, 1996). While total student body approaches advocate training all students, cadre approaches usually involve 15 to 50 participants (Smith et al., 1996).

When selecting mediators, Burrell and Vogl (1990) suggested that it is helpful to choose students who are assertive, effective communicators, and representative of the entire student population. Further, Thompson (1996) recommended that coordinators include at-risk children. In fact, Shulman (1996) noted that some of the best mediators are those who usually are considered troublemakers because they can relate to peers who are having difficulty with conflict. Moreover, Smith, et al., (1996) pointed out that “having
diversity among mediators best assures that the greatest number of students in the school see themselves reflected in the group of mediators, and the group of mediators will be able to respond to the variety of conflicts that will come to mediation” (p.378).

When schools select a diverse group of students, they are better equipped to serve the needs of the entire student body (Vines, Hairston, Carruthers, Wall, & Smith, 1996). Likewise, a diverse group also helps mediators broaden their awareness and tolerance for other's perspectives.

**Training Process**

Jones and Bodtke (1999) stated “the goal of training is to help students understand the nature of conflicts, develop problem solving strategies, appreciate the role of emotion in conflict, learn specific communication and problem solving behaviors needed to enact the approach” (p.111). Peer mediation training includes a review of conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and training in communication skills (Smith, et al., 1996). Trainers also stress the importance of empathy and remaining neutral during disputes.

When students are trained poorly, students are viewed as policemen and are often disliked by other students (Lindsay, 1998). Therefore, effective training is an essential determinant of the success of a peer mediation program.

Training should include discussions, role-plays, and other skill-building activities to allow students to practice what they have learned. Specifically, Humphries (1999) encouraged trainers to provide opportunities for students to role-play realistic playground disputes and practice the process on the playground rather than through general role-plays in the classroom. Further, Burrell and Vogl (1990) advocated that schools include
mediation training in the curriculum to ensure that students have both a theoretical and applied knowledge base. Likewise, Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Burnett (1992) pointed out that overlearning is necessary because “when students have to stop and think what they should do, it is often too late to manage conflict” (p.13). Mediators should also be provided with on-going training and support in order to discuss some of the problems encountered during mediation and improve skills (Shulman, 1996).

**Evaluation**

While educators often overlook the importance of evaluation, Smith, et al., (1996) asserted that “the coordinator who is equipped to support the efficacy of their program is in a much better position to make believers out of disbelievers than is the coordinator who is only able to say that the program seems to be working” (p.382). Evaluation of peer mediation is necessary because few empirical studies are available to support its effectiveness (Powell, McClain, & Halasyamani, 1995). Without evaluating programs, peer mediation may appear to be necessary, but the benefits may be insignificant (O'Shaughnessy, 1998).

In order to justify a peer mediation program, evaluation must illustrate that the goals of the program are attained (O'Shaughnessy, 1998). Therefore, goals must be clearly stated and measured. Johnson, Johnson, and Dudley (1992) instructed that programming is effective if it 1) “reduces the number of student-student conflicts referred to teachers and principals, 2) results in student’s mastering the negotiation and mediation procedures and skills taught, and 3) results in students using these procedures and skills in settings other than the classroom” (p.96). Moreover, Gerber and Day (1999) recommended that researchers evaluate whether or not students are actually using the
program because there is often a "troubling tendency to be supportive of a program with the tendency not to use it" (p. 170).

**Research Support for Peer Mediation**

The review of research is organized into three categories: 1) research studies with a select group of peer mediators (cadre approach), 2) research studies on the total student body/classroom wide approach, and 3) conflict resolution integrated into an academic unit. A summary of the research and future implications are provided after the review of research.

**Research Studies with a Select Group of Peer Mediators (Cadre Approach)**

Crary (1992) evaluated a peer mediation program in an urban, culturally diverse middle school in Santa Monica. Of the 95 cases mediated, 92 (97%) were brought to resolution. Disputants reported a 95% satisfaction rating, and 96% of students reported that their conflicts were still resolved at the end of the semester. After pre and post tests of the Lazarus Ways of Coping Scale, significant change was found in items regarding the ability 1) to change things for the better and 2) help the person who is responsible change his or her mind. An increase in both self and student referrals and a decrease in teacher and principal referrals were reported. Teachers' perception of students' ability to mediate their own conflicts without adult involvement also increased.

Araki (1990) studied the effects of conflict management in an elementary school, intermediate school, and high school in Hawaii for 2 years. Results showed that the most common types of conflicts brought to mediation included gossip/rumor (27.2%), harassment (27.2%), arguments (19.7%), and classroom behavior (9.1%). The most common type of conflict among females was gossip/rumor; whereas, harassment was the
most common among males. Arguments were the primary conflict occurring at the high school level; gossip/rumor was dominant at the intermediate school, and harassment was the most frequent at the elementary school level. A 92.6% mediation success rate was reported. Student's ability to question for feelings and facts, understand problems, and both utilize effective nonverbal and verbal communication increased after training. Interviews with teachers also suggested that student participation in school activities increased after training. No significant reductions in suspensions, dismissals, offenses, or absenteeism were found.

While examining an already existing peer mediation program in the Milwaukee public schools, Burrell and Vogl (1990) reported an 80% resolution rate for the seventy-five cases referred to mediation. After peer mediation was implemented for two years at the high school level, referrals from teachers and administrators decreased, and student referrals increased from 47% to 60%. The increase in student referrals rather than teacher or administrator referrals illustrates students' growing trust in mediators' ability to facilitate the conflict resolution process. Teachers at the middle and high school level noticed less fighting and disruptive behavior after program implementation, and administrators felt students accepted more responsibility for their behavior. Accordingly, students reported high satisfaction in helping others and an increase in their contribution to school improvement, and teachers viewed students to have increased self-esteem and leadership.

Gentry and Benenson (1992) studied the transfer of mediation strategies from school to home settings with 27 student mediators (grades 4-6) after a 10 week training period. After training, both children and parents perceived the frequency of sibling
conflicts to have decreased. Parents also stated that children were able to communicate more effectively and reported intervening less with children's conflict because siblings were able to solve their own problems. Researching the effectiveness of generalization to home settings is important because it is estimated that 75% of children with siblings have at least one violent incident with their siblings in a year. Because children were not randomly assigned and data were based on self-report, generalizations should be made with caution.

Hale and Nix (1997) interviewed and observed students in a pre-existing peer mediation program offered at an inner-city “at-risk” middle school. Researchers evaluated 10 mediations involving 9 different mediators and 18 disputants through videotaped mediation sessions. Results indicated mediators often adopted accusatory positions rather than remain impartial and neutral. For example, one mediator stated, “I saw you starting stuff before with her too; so, don’t act like you didn’t do anything wrong” (p.347). Another frustrated mediator tried to establish an authoritarian position by stating “All right. Shut the hell up! Do you just agree to tell him why you’re mad next time”(p. 349). During individual interviews, disputants commented that the mediation process was unfair because “the mediators didn’t let me tell my side” (p.349), or the mediators are “just people telling me what to do” (p.350). Further, the majority of mediators promoted the “ready-made” response of avoiding one another, rather than helping disputants develop an integrative approach to resolve conflict. Clearly, results indicate that mediators face several communication challenges, and additional training is necessary for mediators to remain impartial and neutral during the mediation process.
Humphries (1999) observed 14 peer mediators (grades 4-6) from an elementary school in Salt Lake City. Approximately 12 hours were spent observing children on the playground, and a checklist was utilized to determine whether mediators were following the problem solving process in which they were trained. Results indicated that 64% of children correctly used the exact mediation procedure. Mediation steps most frequently omitted were 1) asking disputants to describe how they felt and why and 2) restating the disputants' problem description. Observations suggested that peer mediators were able to assist students in forming a mutual resolution 71% of the time. Mediators reported many challenges and drawbacks of their role as mediator. For example, one third of mediators stated their concern for loss of friendship during mediation, and 36% of mediators felt antagonized (teased/called names) by their peers. Further, 21% of mediators stated that disputants tried to fight with them directly. A negative popularity status was also mentioned by 14% of mediators. Because of negativity from peers, some mediators were self-conscious about mediating and occasionally avoided the process.

Long, Fabricius, Musheno, and Palumbo (1998) studied the effects of peer mediation training in an inner city elementary school and middle school with 43 students (grades 3, 5, 7, and 8) who volunteered as peer mediators. The most common agreements were apology and avoidance. Although the majority of the 53 conflicts mediated at the elementary level resulted in agreement, strategies for avoiding negative behaviors in the future were not included in the mediation process. Of the 86 mediations at the middle school level, over 96% resulted in agreement. Once again, the most common response was avoidance. Long et al. (1998) warn that while avoidance "may resolve the immediate conflict, it does not require the parties to consider the perspective of the other party or to
alter patterns of behavior as mediation practitioner manuals advocate” (p.294). When students solve problems through avoidance, they don’t fully maximize their problem-solving abilities to solve conflict through integrative negotiation. Yet, 90% of students surveyed believed the best way to resolve conflict was to “talk it out.” Results suggest that peer mediation training had a positive effect on student’s perception of the importance of settling conflict peacefully. However, no significant changes in mediator’s self-esteem or empathy skills were reported.

Johnson, Johnson, Cotton, Harris, & Louison (1995) studied the effects of peer meditation training with 39 conflict managers from the third and fourth grades. Mediation of 309 conflicts involving 191 students was reported, and 81% of conflicts involved relationship problems associated with physical fights and verbal insults. Students reported that they relied on force (verbal and physical aggression) before bringing conflict to mediation. Of the conflicts brought to mediation, 95% were resolved successfully. The most common solution was avoidance.

Johnson, Johnson, Mitchell, Cotton, Harris, and Louison (1996) studied the effects of a peer mediation program involving 47 third and fourth grade students in an inner city elementary school. Students were trained in communication, assertiveness, and mediation for 1 1/2 days. Students mediated 323 conflicts; of these, 87% involved relationship problems (physical and verbal attacks). Before mediation, students commonly used strategies of physical (40%) and verbal force (51%) to solve problems. When conflict was referred for mediation, 98% of students formed some sort of agreement; yet, the most common agreement during was avoidance (84%).
Tolson, McDonald, and Moriarty (1992) trained 14 student mediators and randomly assigned students referred for interpersonal conflict to receive traditional discipline (warnings or suspension) or mediation. Results indicated that mediation reduced the number of referrals for interpersonal problems. Approximately 90% of disputants involved in mediation reported a high satisfaction rating for fairness.

In summary, current research suggests that peer mediation cadre approaches decrease referrals and improve students' ability to solve their own conflict. Overall, students and educators perceive cadre approaches positively. Nonetheless, a few mediators report a negative popularity status and loss of friendships. Research also suggests that mediators often have difficulty staying neutral. Although the effectiveness of an avoidance resolution is questionable, avoidance was one of the most common solutions cited in the research on cadre approaches.

Research Studies on the Total Student Body/Classroom Wide Approach

Dudley, Johnson, and Johnson (1996) randomly assigned 176 students (grades 6 through 9) in a suburban, midwestern middle school to conditions. Students in the experimental classrooms were given conflict resolution training. Students were placed in a situation (buying/selling of commodities) where they could negotiate in either a distributive or integrative way. Results indicated that before peer mediation training at the school over 90% of students negotiated in a distributive way (win-lose). After training, 83% of middle school students in the experimental condition used an integrative (win-win) approach while 86% of students in the control condition negotiated in a distributive manner. Because the use of integrative approaches is an important part of maintaining relationships throughout life, this study illustrates the effectiveness of peer
mediation in training students to become more successful problem-solvers by seeking an agreement that maximizes mutual outcomes and improves relations. Researchers also examined how training affected student’s perception of conflict. When untrained students were asked to describe conflict, students, on average, listed seven negative words and only one positive word. After training, students listed five negative words and three positive words. Students still perceived conflict more negatively than positively, but their attitudes toward conflict became more positive while the untrained student’s opinions remained highly negative.

Johnson, Johnson, and Dudley (1992) conducted peer mediation training in three classrooms (grades 1-3) in a midwestern, suburban elementary school. Two comparison groups were randomly selected from other students in the school. Students from targeted classroom (83 students total) received training for 30 minutes per day for 30 days. Classroom teachers chose two class mediators daily. Researchers videotaped a simulated conflict situation 4-5 months after training. Results indicated that untrained students were two times more likely than trained students to ask the teacher for help in resolving conflict. After training, conflicts referred to the teacher decreased by 80%, and zero conflicts were reported to the principal. Untrained students also resorted to force during conflict, while trained students used negotiation techniques to discuss conflict.

Nevertheless, 90% of trained students had difficulty expressing feelings and reversing perspectives (100% of untrained students had difficulty with these steps). Many of the students reported using mediation strategies at home with their siblings. Further, many parents whose children were not part of training requested that their children receive training the following year. Interestingly, parents, themselves, requested training to
improve their own conflict management skills. These findings suggest that as the community learned more about peer mediation, their support increased dramatically.

Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Acikgoz (1994) conducted a peer mediation training program in four classrooms involving 92 students in the third to sixth grades. Classrooms were randomly chosen from a pool of teachers who volunteered for the program. All students in the classrooms received 30 minutes of training per day for 6 weeks. After training, students were given a retention test of the procedures of mediation. Ninety percent of students recalled all of the steps, while the remaining recalled a majority of the steps. Conflict scenarios were administered to students before and after training. Before training, more than half reported they would refer conflict to the teacher; after training, students reported that they would have done so less than 15% of time. Before training, none of the students used integrative approaches while negotiating; whereas, after training, 60% of students reported an integrative approach. While role-playing a conflict scenario, between 81% and 100% of students utilized all of the steps trained for negotiation. When 34 students were given the conflict scenarios four months after the end of the study, results indicated that students retained negotiation procedures. Moreover, teachers reported that conflict became less frequent, severe, and destructive. In fact, conflicts referred decreased to adults reduced 80%.

Four months after training, Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Acikgoz (1994) observed students in their natural school environment for 10 days. During this time, conflict was divided into two categories: high investment and low investment. Low investment conflict usually lasted for a short period of time and had little impact emotionally. In contrast, high investment conflict had a greater emotional impact on
students and lasted over a longer period of time. Once trained, students involved in high investment conflict were able to negotiate positively and seek mediation. Findings suggest that meditation skills were retained after 4 months of training.

Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, and Magnuson (1995) randomly selected 6 classes (grades 2-5) containing 144 students from a pool of 22 classrooms whose teachers volunteered to participate in the study. A random sample of 83 students was selected for a control group. Students in the experimental classroom condition received 9 hours of training. Data were collected over a 9-week period before, during, and after peer mediation training. Seven hundred eighty-three conflicts were reported (209 at school and 574 at home). The most common conflicts regarded preferences/values and possession/access. Physical fights and verbal insults were reported more frequently in school (25%) than at home (8%). Before training, the most frequently reported strategy was forcing; integrative negotiation was only used once in the experimental group, and never in the control group. After training, approximately 40% of conflicts in experimental group were resolved through integrative negotiation. Untrained students also reported that one third of conflicts were left unresolved.

Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Magnuson (1995) studied the effectiveness of a peer mediation program with 6 classes (grades 2-5) containing 144 students who received 9 hours of training. A control group of 83 untrained students was also evaluated. When asked to recall the mediation and negotiation steps at the end of the year, 92% of students were able to write out all the steps, and the remaining 8% forgot only one step. Before training, no students reported using negotiation on a written conflict scenario. After training, 37% of responses involved negotiating. Researchers also administered a conflict
scenario interview to a random sample of 69 students before and after training. Prior to training, student’s most common response was asking the other person to give in (59%). After training, 32% responses involved negotiation. Further, teachers interviewed reported a decrease in destructively managed conflicts and a more positive classroom climate. Teachers also reported a decrease in their need to monitor and control student actions and conflict.

Johnson and Johnson (1996b) reflected on 10 studies based on their Teaching Students to be Peacemaker’s Program and suggest that after training the frequency of conflicts managed by teachers dropped 80%, and conflicts referred to the principal decreased by 95%. Findings suggest that students indeed learned what they have been taught in training, applied skills to “real-world” settings, generalized skills to non-school/classroom settings, and preferred problem-solving through integrative (win-win) approaches rather than distributive (win-lose) negotiations. Interviews with school staff suggest that programs improve school climate and increase student’s ability to manage conflict constructively.

Jones and Bodtker (1999) provided conflict resolution training to 160 students (ages twelve to eighteen) at a school for children with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, or ADHD. Besides providing conflict resolution training school wide, 16 students also completed peer mediation training. Students initially resisted training and were unwilling to role-play examples that they could not directly relate to their own lives. Further, many students commented that it was difficult to learn the mediation process. Results indicated a 50% decrease in serious behavioral incidents (destructive, dangerous, and illegal behaviors). Nevertheless, there was an 80% increase in non-serious behaviors
(disorderly and inappropriate), and a 20% increase in moderately serious behaviors (negligence or interference with learning process). Results suggest that although students continued to act out, their behaviors were less destructive and aggressive. A student climate questionnaire suggested that students from the entire student body perceived a significant reduction in fighting. Younger students reported an increase in the general quality of the school and students' ability to respect other students from different backgrounds and cultures.

Lindsay (1998) examined the effects of peer mediation and conflict resolution training in 14 elementary, middle, and high schools, which used both cadre and total student body approaches. Three schools without peer mediation and conflict resolution programming were used as a comparison group. Interviews with 437 school personnel and questionnaires (304 total) were collected for analysis. Peer mediation and conflict resolution were found to have a positive impact on educators' perception of school discipline (fewer fights and suspensions). Programming also increased teacher's ability to manage classrooms. For example, teachers reported that they increased their own ability to understand each student's perspective when encountering a new problem. While teachers in the comparison group (no training) were more likely to intervene with student conflict and set up their own rules for the class, teachers in schools with programming encouraged students to solve their own problems and take responsibility for their actions. One mediator reported initial resistance by peers, yet stated that most students changed their minds after learning more about the mediation process. The most frequent problems identified by school staff were lack of time and family influence. Other factors included "implementing and sustaining conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, providing
sufficient staff resources and leadership, keeping the whole school and community informed, effecting more training of teachers, working with both at-risk and average students, overcoming student and teacher resistance, countering disputants' using mediation to get out of class, and selecting and supervising mediators” (p. 94). Specific aspects of peer mediation programming were difficult to isolate because schools used different programs (cadre vs. total student body) and training procedures.

Matloff and Smith (1992) implemented a school wide conflict resolution program and trained a cadre of mediators. Researchers interviewed 17 teachers and 4 administrators to understand their perception of the effectiveness of the programming. Faculty expressed both positive and negative views. Only a few teachers clearly understood the nature of the program. Some teachers believed a more authoritarian style that emphasized adult involvement and control was more appropriate. These teachers did not believe that students could control their own conflict without adult supervision. Other teachers felt peer mediation and conflict resolution were an important part of prevention. For example, one teacher stated, “I see it as trying to give a tool, a handle to young people, who are at an age in their life when conflict is a natural part of life, but they don't know how to deal with it. I feel like this program helps them to focus on there being ways and steps to deal with anger and emotions...not fly off the handle and say whatever comes to mind” (p. 132). Other teachers felt that no amount of programming would be effective for some student’s behavior. In fact, one teacher states, “I think these kids with real behavioral problems, that are disrupting classes and that are making life miserable for kids and teachers, need to be removed from the classroom totally and just stuck in a loop that they can’t get out of...you know talking to them all day long isn’t
going to help. It just isn’t so” (p.132). Other educators didn’t feel they knew enough about the program. One teacher expressed, “I feel this about a lot of things the school does. Seems like things get instituted and a few people have worked on the committee or whatever it is to start the program, and they don’t do a good job of getting the information to the teachers” (p.134). Data suggest that the educators with the most information about the program were the most comfortable with using and supporting the program. Therefore, it is important to build awareness and provide educators with the skills to implement the program in order to build support and increase effectiveness.

Current research on total student body approaches indicates that training does result in student’s knowing and applying mediation procedures. Furthermore, training increases students’ ability to resolve conflict without adults and improves teachers’ ability to manage classrooms. Total student body programs also decrease referrals, increase student’s use of integrative negotiation procedures, and result in more positive student attitudes toward conflict. Evidence suggests that training is transferred to non-school settings and is retained over time. Moreover, total student body approaches are viewed positively by educators and result in a more positive school climate.

Conflict Resolution Integrated into an Academic Unit

Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, and Laginski (1997) studied the effects of integrating a conflict-resolution program into a ninth grade English literature class in Canada. Forty ninth-grade students participated in the study; 20 were randomly assigned to an experimental condition, and the other 20 were randomly assigned to a control condition. Students received 9.5 hours of training. Students assigned to the experimental condition studied a novel and learned conflict resolution and integrative negotiation
techniques from Teaching Students to Be Peacemaker's Program. Students in the control condition only studied the novel. After training, 85% of students were able to recite all the steps in the negotiation procedure. Results indicated that students in the experimental condition scored significantly higher on an achievement test about the novel. This study was also unique in the fact that training was integrated into the curriculum. When training can be incorporated into an academic unit or already existing program and is positively related to academic achievement, conflict resolution training has a greater chance of surviving over the long run. While responding to written conflict scenarios, untrained students reported relying primarily on adult influence or force to solve conflict. After training, students used negotiation as the primary strategy for dealing with conflict. Further, pre and post measures indicate a significant increase in the experimental condition's ability to constructively manage conflict.

Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Laginski, and O'Coin (1996) conducted a similar study with 42 ninth grade English students. Twenty-one students were randomly assigned to both the control and experimental conditions. Results were similar to the previous study. After training, 76% of students in the experimental condition recalled all the negotiation steps, and 62% recalled the steps 13 weeks later. In response to a written conflict scenario involving taking turns at a computer, untrained students reported solving the conflict by telling the teacher (52%) or by physical aggression (24%). After training, students in the experimental condition used negotiation as their primary strategy for resolving conflict and considered future relationships as goal in the process. After training, students in the experimental condition associated conflict more positively. Further, students in the experimental condition scored significantly higher on the
achievement test. When researchers gave a retention achievement test 13 weeks after the literature unit, students in the experimental condition scored significantly higher. These findings attest to the fact that when schools integrate conflict resolution into an already existing academic unit or program, they “reduce the likelihood of teachers feeling overloaded, and students perceiving classroom activities as being incoherent and disconnected” (p.22).

These studies indicate that conflict resolution programs integrated into an academic unit have a positive effect on academic achievement. This is an important finding considering many new school programs are not accepted or maintained if they do not demonstrate an increase in student achievement. Evidence also suggests that training integrated into an academic unit improves student’s ability to negotiate during conflict.

Critique of Research

Strengths

Strengths of previous research include the use of students (including at-risk) from different age groups and a variety of schools (inner city and suburban). Various programs (both cadre and entire student body) were evaluated, and conflict was measured across settings (school and home). Furthermore, many studies were carefully controlled through the use of control groups, randomly assignment, and different forms of measurement (i.e. written assessment, interview, questionnaires, video-taped role-play, and naturalistic observation).

Lack of Evidence Supporting Use

Because peer mediation research is often based primarily on descriptive, anecdotal accounts, broad claims for program effectiveness are not supported by
empirical research (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Although testimonials from student mediators are encouraging, it is not clear whether the programs are actually effective and if training can be generalized to other situations (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Further, Webster (1993) questioned the assumptions made by conflict resolution and argues that the programs have not proven to be effective in the long run and aren’t cost-effective.

Unless peer mediation programs receive further empirical support, their likelihood of continuing declines (Gerber, 1999). Likewise, Johnson and Johnson (1996a) asserted that “until the effectiveness of such programs has been empirically demonstrated, what schools do will be based on fads and salesmanship” (p.422).

Theoretical Problems

Johnson and Johnson (1996a) pointed out that “the use of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in schools is a classic example of practice being developed separate and apart from the relevant theory and research” (p.494). Because programs were developed from a variety of backgrounds (i.e. lawyers, anti-nuclear war activists, religious groups, and nonviolence advocates) and theoretical perspectives comparison across studies is difficult.

Assessing the effects of peer mediation is complex due to the wide range of programs and the ambiguity of the dependent variables. Because terms such as fighting, discipline referrals, and suspensions are interpreted differently by different people, generalization across settings is difficult (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). For example, a reduction in discipline incidents may be a product of different classification for incidents that go to mediation and those that are sent to administration (Carruthers, et al., 1996). In
this case, there may not be a real decrease in actual conflict, rather a decrease in number of disputes sent to adults (Carruthers et al., 1996).

Accordingly, Johnson and Johnson (1996a) cautioned that “without knowing what exactly is taught to students and how it is taught, a) the program cannot be replicated because there is no way to standardize the treatment, and b) there can be no way to determine which aspects of the program had what effect on the dependent variable” (p.495). Therefore, it is important that researchers clearly identify both their programs (independent variables) and methods of evaluation (dependent variables).

Further, it is difficult to isolate peer mediation programming as the major variable affecting dependent variables because factors such as classroom management style, other social emotional programming, and perception of staff vary from school to school (Lindsay, 1998). Further, different programming styles, amount of training, and quality of programming make generalization across studies complex.

Because of the variety of theoretical perspectives, there are also different views on what constitutes an “acceptable” resolution. In many studies, avoidance was cited as the accepted resolution. Yet, Long, et al., (1998) warned that “while this type of agreement may resolve the immediate conflict, it does not require the parties to consider the perspective of the other party or to alter patterns of behavior as mediation practitioner manuals advocate” (p.294). Further, Schrumpf, Crawford, and Usadel (1991) suggested that when disputants use strategies of avoidance, “they don’t have interest in maintaining the relationship or lack the skills to negotiate a resolution” (p.8). Furthermore, feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and anxiety result from a strategy of avoidance (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Usadel, 1991).
Methodological Problems

Johnson and Johnson (1996a) cited several methodological problems in their review of peer mediation and conflict resolution studies which include lack of random assignment, failure to rotate teachers across conditions, lack of equivalent curriculum across conditions, and lack of control groups. Moreover, most studies are correlational, self-report, or testimonials made by individuals who are dedicated to conflict resolution and peer mediation programs (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

Although a few studies are conducted with special needs and inner-city students, most research is primarily based on middle class, suburban schools. Because most research has been conducted in elementary schools (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, & Laginski, 1997), it is uncertain how effective peer mediation training is with older students. Likewise, most studies are not based on a broad and representative sample of students because subjects are often students who volunteered or were chosen by teachers/administrators (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, & Magnuson, 1995).

Summary of Research

When students are trained in peer mediation, they learn to manage conflict constructively through use of negotiation. As a result, trained students use integrative negotiation (win-win) more frequently than untrained students, and research indicates that mediation procedures are retained over time. Evidence suggests that peer mediation training has positive effects on self-esteem, school climate, student attitude toward conflict, and academic achievement. Likewise, peer mediation has been related to a decrease in discipline referrals. Because students are empowered to solve their own problems, research suggests that the need for adult involvement during conflict decreases
when peer mediation programs are implemented. Furthermore, results indicate that students utilize negotiation skills in both home and school settings, and students, educators, and parents report high satisfaction ratings of peer mediation programming.

Nevertheless, studies have also indicated that peer mediation training has had little effect on the reduction of suspensions and absenteeism (Araki, 1990) and has been related to an increase in non-serious behaviors (Jones & Bodtker, 1999). Furthermore, several challenges to successful implementation have been provided. For example, students have difficulty remaining neutral (Hale & Nix, 1997), expressing feelings, and reversing perspectives (Johnson, Johnson, and Dudley, 1992). Likewise, mediators have also reported loss of friendships and a negative popularity status (Humphries, 1999). Clearly, more research is needed to help overcome these challenges.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers need to continue to increase their efforts to examine the effectiveness of peer mediation programming by conducting carefully-controlled studies that include random assignment and control conditions. The psychological and educational impact of peer mediation also needs to be examined in greater detail.

Researchers also need to study the triggering events that lead to conflict, situation cues that lead to aggression, and barriers that prevent proper mediation (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Likewise, more studies are needed to examine the actual mediation events occurring by conducting more research through naturalistic observation. In this way, researchers may be able to document the actual events taking place during mediation and develop ways to improve the process. Because one of the primary
resolutions during mediation was avoidance, more research is needed to better understand the prevalence and consequences of using an avoidance strategy while managing conflict.

More research is also needed to compare the strengths and weaknesses of cadre versus total student body approaches. In this way, researchers will be better able to assess which approach is more effective in different school conditions.

Further, there is a need to study the effects of peer mediation longitudinally. The current research primarily consists of single studies over a short period of time without replication (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Therefore, it is uncertain how training affects students' conflict management abilities and relationships over a long period of time.

Implications for School Psychology

The role of the school psychologist has changed dramatically over the past few decades, and the school psychologist has become an increasingly important part of educational reform. O’Shaughnessy (1998) summarized several recommendations for school psychologists which include working directly with students to increase their problem solving skills (i.e. social skills or conflict resolution programming) and consulting with school staff to improve the climate of the school. By consulting with school staff, the school psychologist strives to create an environment that serves the needs of all children.

Clearly, peer mediation programs provide opportunities for the school psychologist to serve as a trainer or consultant for the design, implementation, and evaluation of a peer mediation program. In fact, Emerson (1990), as reported in a review by Johnson and Johnson (1996a), found that most teachers and trainers did not understand mediation or how to train peer mediators. By critiquing the strengths and
weaknesses of previous research, the school psychologist can assist schools in implementing a peer mediation program. Similarly, the school psychologist can serve as a consultant who provides information on effective training methods. For example, Kamps (1997) recommended that consultants model training before expecting educators to implement a program.

Furthermore, school psychologists’ training in research design and evaluation qualifies them as premiere candidates for conducting on-going evaluations in order to determine program effectiveness. Clearly, school psychologists’ strong research base makes them an excellent resource for the implementation and evaluation of peer mediation programs.
REFERENCES


