

The Effectiveness of Peer Mediation on Students' Discipline Referral Rates

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This article investigates the effectiveness of a peer mediation program on students' discipline referral rates and their conflicts resolution skills using an action research design. A students' survey and a behavior incident electronic report were used as data-gathering instruments in the research to determine if peer mediation improved the climate in the school. Students' behaviors and their conflict resolution skills were measured twice before and after the training and the data was compared and analyzed. The findings of this study provided insight into the school's discipline needs and offers schools practical steps to implementing a peer mediation program.

Introduction

The purpose of the research was to examine the effectiveness of Peer Mediation training program on middle school students' conflict resolution skills and the students' discipline referral rates in a Middle School, located in the UAE. Peer mediation is used to help two or more students resolve serious conflicts they cannot handle independently. Peer mediation relies on an impartial third party, the peer mediator, to facilitate the problem-solving process and help students use advanced communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills to reach a mutually beneficial resolution. The training group consisted of 23 students. The school behaviour disciplinary referrals were tracked by an electronic document which was developed by the researcher in line with Abu Dhabi Education Council behaviour guidelines and shared with all the school staff for disciplinary referrals. The number of discipline referrals were observed on monthly basis to detect the peer mediation program effect on students' referral rates to the school behaviour team through 6 months. The training which students received to enhance conflict resolution skills and reduce inappropriate behaviour, was presented two times a week in 30 min sessions over a 5-week period. Before and after the training, the students were assessed in terms of their conflict resolution skills reflected by their response to conflict. This study found that as a result of the program, referrals to the school behaviour team through the electronic incident report for verbal offensive, fighting, violence, conflicts, threats or suspensions decreased during the time that the program was operational (from February 2017 till end of May 2017). Additionally, at the conclusion of the study most of the students who were referred to peer mediators, remained disciplined and cooperative.

The Research that Led Us to Peer Mediation

When students possess poor interpersonal and relational skills, they tend to be quick to overreact/fight, become verbally abusive toward other students or unable to cope with viewpoints other than their own. As a result, schools today are becoming places for expressing violence more than before. To help quell aggressive behaviour exhibited by students, many

schools are searching for the best practices in this arena. Peer mediation has repeatedly proven itself by reducing violence in schools. Researchers explain the practices of peer mediation drawing upon the theories of “Social Network” and “Social Learning” (France & McCormick, 1997). Furthermore, there are also others who claim to draw upon the principles of the “behaviour list” approach, along with these theories (Beitel, 1997).

There have been many research studies related to conflict management and conflict resolution education. Argyris (1994) studied improving conflict resolution skills of primary students through curriculum adaptation and teacher intervention. Johnson and Johnson (1996) studied conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in Elementary and Secondary schools. Barron (2000) examined the impact of peer mediation training on adolescents’ problem-solving skills, perception of school climate, and attitudes toward conflict management, Bush (1998) reported that formal schooling and training can play an essential role in conflict transformation. Peace education, as one approach to conflict transformation for instance, seeks to initiate or support an educational process that allows students to articulate, to accommodate, and to accept differences between and within groups that lead to conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Che Rose et al., (2006) examined the impact of conflict resolution training program on the conflict resolution skills of the 9th grade secondary school students. He found that the students’ skills improved, and the level of aggression decreased clearly. Turnuklu and his colleagues (2010) examined the effectiveness of a peer mediation training on an elementary school students’ aggression levels. The results revealed that the training led to a decrease in aggression levels of boys but not in girls. Ferguson et al., (2007) concluded that school peer mediation programs had little effect on school bullying. On the other hand, a recent meta-analysis including 89 studies by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) indicated that majority of these programs have been effective in reducing school violence. They found that bullying decreased an average of 20–23% and victimization decreased an average of 17–20% in intervention groups vs. control groups.

Johnson and his team (Johnson & Dudley, 1992) examined the effect of Teaching Students “To Be Peacemakers” program and found that trained students were more likely to negotiate and less likely to go to the teacher than untrained students. They also reported that trained students were more likely to use the steps of integrative negotiation compared to controls. Johnson and his team conducted 17 studies testing the effectiveness of conflict resolution training (Johnson et al. 1994; Johnson & Johnson 1995, 2001; Johnson et al. 1995). They consistently found that students learned constructive conflict resolution and transferred their knowledge and skills to their actual life settings.

Given these research studies the focal school for this article embarked on implementing their own “Peacemakers” program. This article examines the effectiveness of the school peer mediation program designed to reduce student conflict and ensuing suspensions by teaching students peaceful conflict resolution techniques. It was hypothesized that students after the training would report greater improvements in social competence and conflict resolution skills and greater reductions in aggressive behaviour. The program effect was measured by tracking the rate of students’ discipline referrals and the improvement in the students’ conflict resolution skills in a duration of 6 months. The study used the data and observations in the 3 months before starting the peer mediation program, and then the 3 months after the peer mediation program. The researcher tracked the discipline referral rates on a monthly basis.

Method/Sample

AS outlined earlier, this study was conducted at a private school in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The school is offering the American Curriculum to a predominately Emirati student population. The sample of students who attended the peer mediation training program included 23 students from sixth through to eighth grade, with an age range of 11 - 14 years. All the students were from middle or high socioeconomic status backgrounds. The training group which consisted of 23 students (12 males and 11 females) committed to train 133 students in the middle school through assembly role plays, classroom discussions and interventions during conflicts.

Measures

Measure of the students' conflict resolution skill was collected before and after training program. Students' conflict resolution skills were assessed by a survey consists of 8 responses. Then, the responses were scored as (0 for Often and 1 for sometimes and 2 for never) in responses (1, 3, 7 and 8). While responses (2, 4, 5 and 6) were scored as (0 for never, 1 for sometimes and 2 for often). Thus, each student had a score ranged from 0 to 16 indicating their conflict resolution skills. The students were told that there was no right or wrong answer. The right answer should reflect their real responses.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the peer mediation program, the SBTDR "school behaviour team discipline referrals" measure to assess or index school-wide behavioural climate and peer mediation effectiveness was used. Measures were administered before the training began, and after the training start on monthly basis.

Training Program

A peer mediation program was developed by the researcher. Students were taught a number of essential skills for peer mediation. Those are: being aware of their own feelings, understanding others' point of view, expressing emotions and demands in nonaggressive ways, active listening, cooperation, anger management, and problem solving. The program utilized different materials, such as photos, videos, stories and different didactic techniques, such as pen and paper activities, class discussions, plays, role-plays, and drama.

The peer mediation program duration depended on the participant age group and the required level of support that needed to be provided to ensure understanding. The suggested duration of training at middle and secondary education levels, in a practice aiming to use peers – according to most of the published studies- is 10 sessions of training, each of which lasts for 30 - 35 minutes. The private school's SENCO implemented 12 sessions each of which lasted 30 minutes, (6 hours) before the students could practice peer mediation. Then a series of role plays, and drama sessions were implemented to reinforce the students' skills in the targeted area. The peer mediators' team were known around the school as "peacemakers"; they wore "peacemaker" badges to be identified easily by others.

Procedure

The classroom teachers were asked to rate the students according to four areas: 1- Cooperation and ability to get along with others. 2- Responsibility (follows through with commitments). 3-

Enthusiasm (invests energy and time into tasks). 4- Scholarship (takes responsibility for schoolwork). Then, the categories were scored from 1 to 4 (1 disagree, 2 sometimes, 3 often, 4 agree) to be nominated for peer mediation. The two students from each classroom with the highest rating were invited to join peer mediation program.

Letters introducing the program and the responsibility agreement were sent by the school to parents, to request permission. After obtaining permission to conduct the training from the parents, school principal, and teachers, the peer mediation program was implemented with the training group. During and after the training, the students were allowed to use the conflict resolution skills and strategies, to practice the peer mediation process. The rates of referrals were measured monthly to track the discipline referral rates using the electronic behaviour incident report.

In December 2016, the behaviour incident report was released to start tracking the discipline referral rates in middle school. On 27th February 2017, mediations have been held involving 23 students “peacemakers” sought peaceful methods of resolving their interpersonal conflicts, and helping others to adopt the same process. As a result of these mediations, the students’ conflict resolution skills were developed, and the students became able to practice the 6 steps of peer mediation process which are: 1. Agree to Mediate; 2. Storytelling and Gathering Points of View; 3. Focus on Interests and Needs; 4. Create Win-Win Solutions; 5. Evaluate Options; and 6. Create an Agreement. To date, the middle school has seen a decrease in the number of discipline referrals for fights and threats made involving its students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a peer mediation program at the middle school level involving sixth, seventh and eighth grade students attending the private school using a school-based action research design. The discipline referrals track tool (behaviour incident report) is a google form shared on the school drive, which is monitored by the researcher. There was a significant number of discipline referral in the Middle School through December 2016 to February 2017 which led to high rates of suspensions during the same duration.

The intended change for the Middle School, is for the students to use peer mediation to resolve their interpersonal conflicts peacefully rather than resorting to violent or aggressive actions requiring referrals to administrative for intervention. It is anticipated, that over time this will ultimately result in an improvement in the overall school climate.

Most all sixth, seventh and eighth students are developmentally mature enough to recognize appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in the school. They are also able to identify methods for the successful resolution of confrontations before they become violent. Consequently, such a program should benefit the students of the school by helping them seek and foster peaceful resolutions to their problems. Based on this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What is the impact of peer mediation program on the rate of discipline referrals between middle school students?
2. What is the impact of the peer mediation program on the mediator's conflict resolution skill?

Participants

This study utilized a semi-experimental design. Participants were selected through a teacher survey. The population of this study covers N = 23 students (6th -8th Grade) students in the selected Middle School from 10 classes. Students were chosen according to the teachers' survey results. The survey had 4 areas to be evaluated for each student by his teachers. The 4 areas were: Cooperation and ability to get along with others; Responsibility (follows through with commitments); Enthusiasm (invests energy and time into tasks) and Scholarship (takes responsibility for schoolwork). Later, these selected students were informed about the purpose of the peer mediation training and application program and their roles in the program. They were given 6 hours of peer mediation training. After receiving the training, students were given an opportunity of applying the learned mediation skills to the 133 students' population.

Collection and Data Analysis:

The effectiveness of peer mediation program is typically measured in two ways: **examining** the effectiveness of the program on trained mediators' conflict resolution skills by a questionnaire developed by IREX organization (2013) which was applied before and after the training, and **charting** the number and frequency of discipline referrals using SBTDR (school behaviour team discipline referrals) which measured the behaviour incident report for a series of six months (December to May) to examine the school climate by tracking the discipline referral rates.

The quantitative data gathered was then compared to the figures reported from the first semester. The number of discipline referrals was tallied and compared on a month-by-month basis. The number of referrals submitted by the school behaviour team 3 months before starting the peer mediation program (December, January and February) using the behaviour incident report, was compared to the number of referrals submitted during 3 months after starting the peer mediation program. It was felt that the program will be deemed effective if the referral numbers before mediation were more than the referral numbers after mediation program start.

Effectiveness of implementation on students' response to conflict

Effectiveness of Peer Mediation on Student discipline referral rates at the school was collated up until the last week of February 2017. Followed by 6 weeks of students training program in the mediation process, the students of the school were afforded the option of resolving their difference through a mediation. This mediation, conducted by these trained students, and facilitated by the researcher allowed them to work together to identify peaceful methods of conflict resolution rather than allowing the problems fester where they eventually would result in some form of aggressive behaviour.

The students' conflict resolution skills were administered by the researcher and one of the 7th grade gifted & talented students in the school. For the pre-test portion of this study, the students were tested on February 29th, 2017 during the school day. For the post-test portion of this study, students were administered the measures on May 28th, 2017. Students were administered the measures in two group in ICT lab. Each group consisted of between 11 - 12 students depending on the absences or tardiness for the day. Students were read the questionnaires in their entirety in order to ensure reading level did not hinder their ability to complete the measures.

Effectiveness of Implementation on SBTDR

As discussed in the introduction, the effectiveness of peer mediation programs was commonly assessed by tracking discipline referral rates over time. In keeping with the tradition in the field, data about discipline referrals were gathered and analyzed to determine whether any differences exist between the number of referrals before and after implementation of the mediation program.

Findings of the Study

The data for this study – as shown in Figure 1- were collected from December 2016, through the to the last week in May 2017. At this time, the total number of discipline referrals in the Middle School referred to the school behaviour team for disciplinary action were 114.

The number of students who were referred to SBT during December 2016 (including 2 weeks of winter break) was 0 students as the teachers were still under the training stage (See Table 1). In January 2017 (including one week winter break), the number of discipline referrals was clearly increased to 23 referrals (Table 1). During February of the 2017 a second increase in the number of discipline referrals occurred to 65 referrals. In the end of March, although peacemakers didn't start implementing their role fully, the discipline referrals sharply decreased to 15 referrals after 4 weeks of starting the peer mediation training program. While 6 students were referred to the school behaviour team during April, then only 5 were referred during May of the same school year according to (SBTDR) tool.

Month	December	January	February	March	April	May
Number of Referrals	0	23	65	15	6	5
Rate	0	20	57	13	6	4

Table 1: Number of Students Referred to the School Behaviour Team for Disciplinary action.

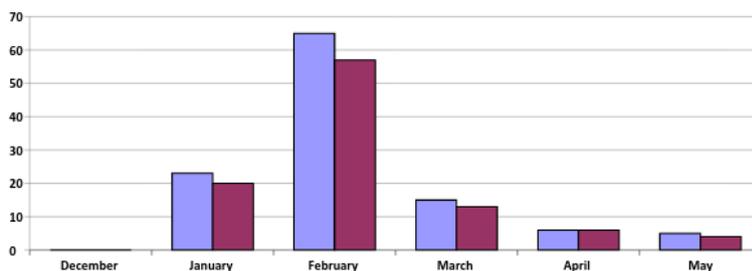


Figure 1: Discipline Referral Data

Students' Survey:

A survey was given to each student to measure his/her response to conflict. 91% return rate was achieved. The students had to scale each response according to their response to conflict with (Often, sometimes or never). Responses were scored as (0 for Often and 1 for sometimes and 2 for never) in responses (1, 3, 7 and 8). While responses (2, 4, 5 and 6) were scored as (0 for never, 1 for sometimes and 2 for often). Thus, each student had a score ranged from 0 to 16

indicating their conflict resolution skills. A summary of the responses is found in Table 2 and Table 3.

Response	Often	Sometimes	Never
Yell or threaten the person.	14.3%	43%	42%
Try to understand the other side.	38%	52%	9.5%
Call the other person names.	19%	38%	42%
Try to reach a compromise.	24%	57%	19%
Talk to find ways to agree.	28%	33%	38%
Apologize.	19%	47%	33%
Hit or push back.	4.8%	24%	71%
Cry.	9.5%	14.3%	76%

Table 2: The rates of the students' responses before the program began

Response	Often	Sometimes	Never
1.Yell or threaten the person.	0	28%	71%
2.Try to understand the other side.	57%	43%	0
3.Call the other person names.	0	24%	76%
4.Try to reach a compromise.	43%	38%	19%
5.Talk to find ways to agree.	52%	33%	14.3%
6.Apologize.	43%	43%	14.3%
7.Hit or push back.	0	10%	90%
8.Cry.	0	14.3%	86%

Table 3: The rates of the students' responses after the program began

After peer mediation training program, 29% of participants improved their response towards yelling or threatening others, 34% towards calling names, 19% towards physical aggression, and 10% towards crying. In addition, students who attended the peer mediation training program increased their tries to understand others and reach a compromise (about 20%). They improved their response towards discussions and apology (about 24%). This indicates that the Peer Mediation program was effective in helping students improve their convictions for resolving their interpersonal conflicts.

Discussion

Peer mediation programs are used recently in a wide range of schools. As a result of these programs, student violence rates have been shown to decrease at all levels of education including the middle level.

The researcher developed and implemented a Peer Mediation program in the private school. In a survey completed by the students at the school, between 10 to 34% showed improvement in eight areas of the response to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner.

The selection of the students as peer mediators was based on behavioural and personal standards were shared with the middle school students. The majority of the non-selected students who have the desire to participate in the program, internalized these standards start to adopt them in their school life for further future selections. This part explains why the decrease in discipline referral rates happened once the selection started, even before the peer mediators start practicing their roles in the school.

The majority of the selected students accepted to help their friends as a humanistic mission. Students declared the peer mediation application has had a positive impact on their feeling of responsibility and that they are willing to continue joining the peer mediation group and practicing the same role next year in the school.

This research has shown that implementing peer mediation has created a positive classroom climate and supported the school atmosphere. The resonates with the research by Lynn (1986). The findings of this research have shown that conflict resolution skills of the students have been developed more effectively through this peer mediation program. This finding has been supported by the work of Salmivalli (1999). As a result of this, students have been eager to take part in the peer mediation training program and they have supported to continue the program. As discussed in the research made by Morey and Miller (1993), there have been a moderate level of satisfaction in all of the dimensions of peer mediation application on behalf of service user students. However, as Girard (1995) notes, the full benefits of conflict resolution may depend on the inclusion of this subject in the pre-service curriculum and require more comprehensive training, support of teachers, principals, and parents. Moreover, there is a lack of evaluating conflict resolution in schools in order to improve the effectiveness of these applications. The effects of education on teacher perceptions of student behaviour should be examined. Similar studies should be conducted both in elementary and high school at the population at different grades.

While conducting the current research, the researcher noticed clearly that higher levels of school-wide discipline referral rates, were associated with higher levels of problematic behavioural climates in schools. When a school experiences increases in discipline referral rates, these increases probably have occurred in the form of one or more student misbehaviour or behaviour disorders. Without school-wide behaviour support interventions, high discipline referral rates and problematic school behavioural climate are likely to persist.

Discipline referral data also may be used to evaluate the extent to which school staff members are following written school discipline policies. Morgan-D'Atrio et al. (1996) used a computer printout of discipline referrals to determine that about 45% of the disciplinary actions in a school did not correspond to its written policies and more than 20% of the suspensions violated those policies. When administrators do not work with teachers to monitor and solve school-wide discipline problems, they may not be aware of the lack of consensus among staff members. This point is reiterated by Bingham, Haubrich, and White (1993) research when they surveyed teachers and principals and analysed their agreements and disagreements on a variety of issues, including the levels of staff consensus regarding how to handle school discipline problems and the overall quality of the school. A high correlation was found between level of disagreement on how to handle discipline problems and level of disagreement about school quality. Principals tended to be more likely than teachers to think that staff consensus on discipline was high and that the quality of the school was high.

The success or failure of peer mediation programs is dependent upon two important circumstances within the school. The first is the support received for the program from the administration of the school. Without the support of the principal and administration, no program has the chance to be effective. Secondly, schools that have some evidence of a conflict

resolution curriculum for the entire student population to learn seem to be the most successful (Lupton-Smith, Carruthers, Flythe, Goettee, & Modest, 1996).

In the current study, the results presented no discipline referrals found during December 2016 due to some technical problems in the system during release period, and non-completion of teachers training. A 20% increase in discipline referrals in the middle school during January, then a 37% increase during February in the middle school discipline referral rates, pushed to a quick procedure to help quell the increase of misbehaving between the middle school students. Before and after implementing the peer mediation program, harassment, defiance, disruption, and fighting were the most common problem behaviours referred to the school behaviour team. However, after implementation of the peer mediation program, decreases were observed in discipline referral rates on a monthly basis, starts with 44% decrease in referral rates on March, then 7% decrease on April, and ends with 2% decrease on May 2017.

Future Directions

The 2016 - 2017 school year was the first year Peer Mediation was available for the students in the middle school to use as a means of peacefully resolving their interpersonal conflicts. As previously stated in this article, Peer Mediation was a success statistically as well as in the perceptions of the students within the school.

However, after studying the Peer Mediation program for this year, some recommendations for the further development of the program were formed. Peer Mediation is most effective when students themselves recognize that they are in an interpersonal conflict, and as a result, request a mediation. Student requests should occur much more frequently than referrals by members of the school's staff. Therefore, the researcher believes that a conflict resolution curriculum should be developed and implemented in the 6 to 9 grades which instructs the students in conflict resolution techniques and allows the students to become more aware of the option of Peer Mediation if the techniques they learned fail to successfully resolve the problem. This curriculum could be taught by trained classroom teachers. Peer Mediation only became available to the students in the end of February 2017.

Students were identified as possible mediators by their teachers, then were trained. In the future, it would be beneficial to have the program start as close to the opening of school as possible. To accomplish this, the identification of possible mediators should be conducted in June of the current year by middle school teachers. These teachers have interacted with these students all year, know them well, and should have better judgement regarding their maturity level. By identifying these students in June, a training session could be scheduled for the first week of September during the following year. Likewise, any faculty member that would like to participate would have the opportunity to make it known by June, thus allowing them to participate in the September training.

The program is in need to be integrated with the school behaviour policy. School disciplinary policies should include peer mediation as an option for resolving incidents brought about by interpersonal disputes and a clarification of the types of disputes that are and are not appropriate for mediation.



Finally, since this was the first year Peer Mediation was available to the middle school students of the private school, students and teachers alike were somewhat apprehensive to use it; however, once they began seeing positive results, the utilization of the program increased. Consequently, the program will be used on a much wider scale in subsequent years. As a result, the school will become a more pleasant place to learn and students will interact more positively with one another. This will ultimately develop into a more harmonious environment that is more conducive to learning.

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