

The Value of Peer Mediation in
Reducing Conflict Behavior

Amy C. Nikolaisen

Carroll College

Running head: PEER MEDIATION



Signature Page

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Psychology.

Anne Parkins

Director

Marie M. Vanisko

Reader

Bradley J. Elmer

Reader

April 7, 1995

Acknowledgments

I owe a great deal of gratitude to many people. The completion of this paper was made possible with the help of many individuals. I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students of Clancy Elementary School who were involved with the research of my paper from the beginning. I especially want to thank Charlene Nava, the school counselor at Clancy Elementary School. Charlene was the inspiration behind the Conflict Management program used in my research. She also taught me a great deal about children and the way they operate.

I want to thank my readers, Brad Elison and Marie Vanisko, for all the advice and time they spent guiding me through the statistical analysis. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Anne Perkins, the director of my thesis. She has been such an inspiration not only for this paper, but throughout my four years at Carroll College.

There are a few others I would like to thank including my parents. They gave me the chance to attend Carroll College and have always given me much needed support. I need to thank Jonathan Barsness for believing in me and my ability to complete this project. I would also like to thank Cathi Burgoyne for always reminding me that everything will be all right.

Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to determine if a particular peer mediation program reduced the incidence of conflict on playgrounds. The difference between observed conflict behaviors at Clancy Elementary School before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program was examined. The student population ($n = 372$) of Clancy Elementary consisting of grades K-8, participated in the study. The subjects were observed during recesses before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program. The data was compared between the two observation periods. Results indicate that the Conflict Management program was effective in reducing conflict behaviors on the playground ($p < .05$). Both the total number and each type of conflict behavior were less ($p < .05$) after implementation of the Conflict Management program.

The Value of Peer Mediation in Reducing Conflict on Playgrounds

Elementary educators are taking a new approach at producing students that are capable of functioning effectively in society today (Maruyama, 1992). Students interpersonal relationships that occur in school are indicators of present and future adjustment (Steinberg, 1991). Educators are now aware that preventive efforts to resolve conflicts must begin early in order for successful resolution (Steinberg, 1991). Conflict is a natural part of life and it can be found wherever human interaction occurs (Bondesio, 1992). The frequency, intensity, and duration of conflict varies; therefore, conflict needs to be managed in a manner that allows the positive aspects to be maximized and the negative aspects minimized (Bondesio, 1992).

Kurt Lewin (cited in Maruyama, 1992), who wrote on the topics of child development and education, developed what is known as field theory that has shaped the way many researchers think. Field theory allows researchers to study individuals in social settings, the social forces that influence individuals, and the structures of different environments (cited in Maruyama, 1992). Lewin's field theory provided a basis for the study of education and conflict management (Maruyama, 1992).

Lewin (cited in Maruyama, 1992) defines conflict as a situation in which forces acting on an individual are opposites in direction and about equal in strength. All conflicts that occur in the social scene have individuals with both a self interest and a common interest (Coombs, 1987). Lewin identifies three types of conflict (a) two

positive goals that are mutually exclusive of one another, (b) two negative events of which only one can be avoided, or (c) positive and negative events that are linked (cited in Maruyama, 1992). According to McFarland (1992), students tend to use one of the following three styles to handle conflicts (a) the dominating style which is characterized as the fear of losing control and not getting what they want, (b) appeasing styles which are usually used by those students who lack self confidence and want to maintain harmonious relationships and, (c) cooperative styles which are used by those who are not threatened by disagreements and who understand that people have differences of opinions.

Berryman-Fink and Brunner (1987) have reported a significant difference in conflict behavior of males and females. The behavior of males and females is often based on gender stereotypes (Papa & Natalie, 1989). Ashmore and Del Boca (1979) define gender stereotypes as: "the structured sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and men" (p. 261). They indicate that males exhibit a dominating and competitive behavior while Shockley-Zalaback and Morley (1984) indicate that females use prosocial, compromising, and avoiding styles. Hocker and Willmot's (1985) research supports the theory that males and females choose the behaviors they do during conflicts partially because of gender identity. Terhune (cited in Papa & Natalie, 1989) shows that males have a tendency to exploit or compete, while females want to cooperate and compromise.

Schools must use positive and preventive strategies in helping students resolve conflicts (Satchel, 1992). Peer mediation along with traditional means of discipline,

such as suspension, provides a solid base for disputants to resolve their conflicts on the playground (Lane & McWhirter, 1987). Peer mediation allows students to practice critical thinking, problem solving, and self discipline (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Professional organizations and previous research done with peer mediation have encouraged school counselors to implement peer mediation into their guidance programs (Bowman, 1986).

In 1983, Reed reported that an increase in student conflict was linked to both the lack of skills of school personnel to promote conflict management and a lack of policies and programs in the schools to help reduce the number of conflicts. Conflict management teaches students specific skills for arguing effectively; hence, conflicts turn into constructive learning experiences (Maruyama, 1992). Conflict management allows students to practice the skills of self regulation on a daily basis (Satchel, 1992). Self regulation is the ability to behave in a socially accepted manner in the absence of external monitors (Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

Both student behavior and school discipline problems have shown improvement as a result of peer mediation (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Other reported benefits are improved academic performance and improved behavior in classrooms (Bowman & Myrick, 1987). Kelpp, Halper, and Perry reported in 1986 (cited in Lane & McWhirter, 1992) that students participating in these programs have greater credibility regarding student social interaction. McCormick reported in 1988 that disputants that are frequently referred for discipline problems will eventually exhibit a shift toward cooperation after participating in peer mediation. Conflict management has been shown

to drastically decrease the number of discipline events (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). The number of discipline events dropped from 83 to 19 after two years at a school in Hawaii according to Araki, Takeshita, & Kadomoto's research in 1989 (cited in Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Also, Koch in 1988 reported that at a school in New York, the number of fights decreased by 50%. An Arizona school saw a drop of 47% in their total number of discipline events per month indicated by McCormick in 1988 (cited in Lane & McWhirter, 1992). The benefits for both the students and the schools will be more clearly defined as additional program evaluations are developed (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Researchers have concluded that the process of understanding conflict resolution takes a long time (Steinberg, 1991). Therefore, by implementing peer mediation programs in schools, conflict resolution can become an integral component of a school's discipline plan (Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of the Conflict Management program made a difference in observed conflict behaviors at Clancy Elementary School.

Method

Subjects

The subjects included the student population ($n = 372$) of Clancy Elementary School in Clancy, Montana. The students were in grades kindergarten through eighth. Males and females were both observed.

Procedure

The peer mediation program used in this study is entitled Conflict Management. The program is based on a community mediation model used by the San Francisco Community Board which had five years of experience settling conflicts between neighbors and businesses before introducing it to the schools (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Students receive 16 hours of training and role play practice before they become team mediators on the playground (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). During the training, the students learn to mediate conflicts by applying communication skills, listening to varying perspectives, evoking mutual contributions to the problem's eventual solution, and paying attention to feelings of all the students involved (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Conflict managers work in teams of two to help disputants use proper problem solving skills (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). After student managers have been trained, they assist other students in thinking about conflicts, their ideas and feelings, and discovering a solution (Bowman & Myrick, 1987).

This study began when the mediation program was presented to the Clancy Elementary staff and students. As implementation approached, students were able to vote for themselves or others to become conflict managers. The teachers and school counselor were also allowed to vote for students. The final selection of the student managers was decided by who received the most votes. Sixteen students were trained by adult staff members over a two day period. The students were taught communication skills that involved active listening, reflection of feelings, message clarification, body language, "I messages", brainstorming, and effective problem solving. The adult

trainers also used a lot of role-play with the students to teach them the mediation process. The four basic stages of the mediation process are introduction, listening, wants, and solutions. Appendix A provides the basic checklist of the step-by-step sequence of conflict management. After the training was completed, the students were assigned to the lunch recess in pairs.

The effectiveness of the Conflict Management program was studied by comparing the type and number of conflicts before versus after the program was implemented. I observed the student's behavior on the playground during morning, lunch, and afternoon recesses. The observation was done by walking around the playground area and recording what was seen. Also, whenever the playground aids had to intervene in conflict it was recorded. Two 15 minute sessions during the 30 minute morning and afternoon recesses were observed. One 30 minute session was observed at lunch recess. A total of 30 sessions were observed both before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program. The before and after periods were identical in total time periods. I recorded the frequency of each of the following conflict behaviors during each playground session.

1. No outward aggression observed by any student. Students encounter one another. An example would be that two students run for the same ball or swing, but one takes the swing or ball and the other leaves.

2. Aggression by the students is minimal. There is no interference by external monitors necessary to resolve the conflict. Some examples include pushing, yelling, and chasing.

3. Physical aggression, loud yelling, and/or arguing are visible. An external monitor must step in to resolve the conflict.

During observation, other variables were recorded including sex of the students, grade level present on the playground, time of the session, date, weather, and day of the week.

The data was analyzed using a one-tailed t-test. The dependent variable was the change in number of conflict behaviors of the students following the implementation of the Conflict Management program. Each of the three previously discussed behaviors were observed to determine if change occurred. The independent variable was the Conflict Management program.

Results

A t-test for equality of means was conducted for each type of conflict as well as for the total number of conflicts to determine the change in conflict behavior following implementation of peer mediation as described in the Conflict Management program. Results of these analyses are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1

T-Test Differences Between Means of Conflict Behavior Observed Before and After Implementation of Conflict Management Program

Conflict Type	Before Mean	After Mean	t-value	DF	Significance
One*	0.9333	0.2667	2.26	37.50	.05
Two**	3.1000	1.7667	2.57	44.76	.05
Three***	1.2333	0.3000	2.38	31.86	.05
Total	5.2667	2.3333	3.15	37.13	.05

* = no outward aggression

** = minimal aggression

*** = physical aggression or loud shouting

A comparison of mean composite scores for behavior type one showed a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the number of conflict incidents before (0.9333) and after (0.2667) the Conflict Management program was implemented. A t-value of 2.26 with degrees of freedom equaling 37.50 was obtained. A comparison of mean composite scores for behavior type two showed a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the number of conflict incidents before (3.1000) and after (1.7667). A t-value of 2.57 with 44.76 degrees of freedom was obtained. A comparison of mean composite scores for behavior type three also showed a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the number of conflicts before (1.2333) and after (0.3000). A t-value of 2.38 with 31.86 degrees of freedom was obtained. A comparison of mean composite scores for the total number of conflicts showed a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the number of conflicts before (5.2667) and

after (2.3333) the Conflict Management program was implemented. A t-value of 3.15 with 37.13 degrees of freedom was obtained.

The difference between male and female conflict behavior before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program and the conflict behavior of the different grade levels before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program can be seen more clearly by comparing the mean scores for each of the groups tested. The mean scores are based on the total number of behaviors before and after the Conflict Management program was implemented. The results of these comparisons are included below in Table 2.

Table 2

T-Test Differences Between Males, Females, and Grade Levels Before and After Implementation of Conflict Management Program

	Before Mean	After Mean	t-value	DF	Significance
Gender					
Males	8.0667	3.4667	3.19	17.39	.05
Females	2.4667	1.2000	2.7	19.94	.05
Grade					
K-3	4.7143	2.1667	2.45	16.53	.05
4-6	4.2000	2.2500	1.36	11.27	.05
4-8	8.3333	2.8333	1.74	6.72	.05

The mean score for males before (8.0667) and females before (2.4667) compared to the male mean score after (3.466) and the female mean score after (1.2000) showed a

decrease in the number of conflicts after the Conflict Management program was implemented. Males showed a larger reduction than females.

The mean scores for the different grade levels also showed a significant difference. Grades K-3, who are present on the playground from 10:15 to 10:30 and 2:00 to 2:15, had a before mean score of 4.7143 and an after mean score of 2.1667. Grades 4-6, who are present on the playground from 10:00 to 10:15 and 2:15 to 2:30, had a before mean of 4.2000 and an after mean of 2.2500. Grades 4-8, who are on the playground from 12:00 to 12:30, had a before mean of 8.3333 and after mean of 2.8333 which shows the most significant change of all the grade levels.

Discussion

The comparison of the conflicts before and after the implementation of the Conflict Management program favors the implementation of the program. These results indicate that the Conflict Management program is effective in reducing the number of conflict behaviors on the playground. This study is congruent with previous research indicating that peer mediation is effective in reducing conflict behavior.

Results like those found in this study have initiated school personnel to begin a new movement in education to bring conflict resolution programs into all schools (Bondesio, 1992). The reason for this movement is clear. Everyone involved is taught that conflict resolution is a process for talking about problems, learning more about the views of others, and practicing better communication in a nonviolent, nonjudgmental atmosphere. According to Bondesio (1992), training is much better than just knowledge about conflicts. Training ensures prepared and able conflict managers in the schools

(Bondesio, 1992). Educators should not ignore the valuable requirement of “people skills” in today’s society (McFarland, 1992). According to Steinberg (1991), teachers can reinforce “people skills” by means of the problem solving process. They can help students recognize the specific actions that contributed to the problem, the necessary skills to negotiate, and how to generate and evaluate varied solutions (Steinberg, 1991).

The conflict managers are valuable resources to both the classroom and the playground. Through programs like Conflict Management, students can train other students to use behaviors that benefit students, counselors, and teachers (Bowman & Myrick, 1987). Conflict managers can reach their goal of teaching other students conflict resolution by interrupting conflicts early (Lane & McWhirter, 1992). Resolving conflicts early is important because interpersonal and intergroup conflicts usually begin small and escalate when unresolved (Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

Kurt Lewin (cited in Maruyama, 1992) noted, “It seems easier for society to change education than for education to change society” (p. 165), yet in this case success has occurred in using education to change society. Roderick (1988) emphasized a valuable aspect of school mediation programs, “Young people have many choices besides passivity or aggression for dealing with conflict . . . (through mediation) we give them the skills to make those choices real in their own lives” (p. 90).

This study also supports previous research relevant to gender differences in conflict behavior. The study indicates that males have more outward, observable conflicts than females. While observing the students at recess, it should be noted, that most male conflicts could be seen from a distance, while female conflicts had to be viewed close

up in order to identify the conflicts. This was noticed during observations following the implementation of the Conflict Management program which follows the research reported by Papa and Natalie (1981) that it is essential to examine how people behave over time in order to gain a more complete understanding of gender differences in conflict behavior. Hottes and Kahn (1974) report that males see conflict on the basis of strategy and their goal is to maximize their gains. Hottes and Kahn (1974) also report that females in conflict tend to accommodate in order to be social. Females will compete however, in order not to look like failures (Hottes & Kahn, 1974). Roloff and Greenberg (1979) indicated that the only assertive strategy females prefer to use is verbal aggressiveness, but would prefer to use prosocial means and regression.

A study done with high school students by Roloff and Greenberg in 1979 indicated that at the high school level males prefer aggression, revenge, and verbal aggression to resolve their conflicts. Maybe if educators interact with students at a young age they can counteract these typical stereotypes. Roderick (1988) observed, "At a time when human survival depends on finding alternatives to violence for resolving differences, there is no more compelling mission than for counselors to encourage peer mediation programs so that the healthy development of children may be fostered" (p. 90).

There are a variety of ways this study could have been accomplished and many ways it could be improved. A more high tech method of observation using video cameras and/or more individuals observing the playground behavior would be beneficial. Also, an increased amount of observation time would help support the statistical analysis.

It would be interesting and valuable to get direct feedback from staff and students. This would provide the researcher with more information for interpreting results. Additional data taken from other sources besides the playground, like the classroom, lunchroom, or home could indicate if the program is effective in improving conflict behavior in other areas of the student's life. Some parents of students involved in peer mediation programs report that conflicts occurring at home are resolved in new and productive ways (Lane & McWhirter, 1992).

Conflict is a part of human existence therefore, teachers, counselors, and administrators should be working on ways to reach more students. This project supports the notion that peer mediation programs are an excellent way to achieve this goal.

References

- Ashmore, R. D., & Del Boca, F. K. (1979). Sex stereotypes and implicit personality theory: Toward a cognitive-social psychological conceptualization. Sex Roles, 5, 219-248.
- Berryman-Fink, C., & Brunner, C. C. (1987). The effects of sex source and target on interpersonal conflict management styles. The Southern Speech Communication Journal, 53, 38-48.
- Bondesio, M. J. (1992). Conflict management at school: An unavoidable task. Bloomington, IN: Reading and communication. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 355-655)
- Bowman, R. P. (1986). Peer facilitator programs for middle graders: Students helping each other grow up. School Counselor, 33, 221-229.
- Bowman, R. P., & Myrick, R. D. (1987). Effects of an elementary school peer facilitator program on children with behavior problems. School Counselor, 34, 369-377.
- Coombs, C. H. (1987). The structure of conflict. American Psychologist, 42, 355-363.
- Hocker, J.L., & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). Interpersonal Conflict (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Hottes, J. H., & Kahn, A. (1974). Sex differences in a mixed-motive conflict situation. Journal of Personality, 42, 260-275.

- Koch, M. (1988). Resolving disputes: Students can do it better. NASSP Bulletin, 72(504), 16-18.
- Lane, P. S., & McWhirter, J. J. (1992). A peer mediation model: Conflict resolution for elementary and middle school children. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 27, 15-23.
- McCormick, M. (1988). Mediation in the schools: An evaluation of the Wadefield Pilot Peer Mediation Program in Tucson, Arizona. Washington, DC: American Bar Association.
- McFarland, W. P. (1992). Meeting of the minds: Recognizing styles of conflict management helps students develop people skills. Vocational Education Journal, 67(5), 26-27.
- Papa, M. J., & Natalie, E. J. (1989). Gender, strategy selection, and discussion satisfaction in interpersonal conflict. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 53, 260-272.
- Reed, R. J. (1983). Administrator's advice: Causes and remedies of school conflict and violence. NASSP Bulletin, 67(462), 75-79.
- Roderick, T. (1987/1988). Johnny can learn to negotiate. Educational Leadership, 45, 86-90.
- Roloff, M. E., & Greenberg, B. S. (1979). Sex differences in choice of modes of conflict resolution in real-life and television. Communication Quarterly, 27(3), 3-12.

- Satchel, B. B. (1992). Increasing prosocial behavior of elementary students in grades K-6 through a conflict resolution management program. Eugene, OR: Education Management. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 347-687)
- Shockley-Zalabek, P. S. , & Morley, D. D. (1984). Sex differences in conflict style preferences. Communication Research Reports, 1, 28-32.
- Steinberg, A. (1991, July/August). How schools can help stem violence in today's youth. The Harvard Education Letter, p. 1-2, 4-5.

Appendix A

Elementary Conflict Management Process

Introduction and Groundrules

1. Introduce yourselves.
2. Ask if they want to solve the problem.
3. If yes, move to a different area.
4. Get agreement to four rules:
 - do not interrupt
 - no name calling or put downs
 - be as honest as you can
 - agree to solve the problem

Defining the Problem

5. Decide who will talk first.
6. Ask person #1 what happened - RESTATE.
Ask person #1 how he or she feels and why.
7. Ask person #2 what happened - RESTATE.
Ask person #2 how he or she feels and why.

Finding Solutions

8. Ask person #1 what he or she can do to resolve the part(s) of the problem for which s/he is responsible.
9. Get agreement from person #2.
10. Ask person #2 what he or she can do to resolve the parts(s) of the problem for which s/he is responsible.
11. Get agreement from person #1.

*Make sure you get a solution for each part of the problem.

12. Ask each disputant what he or she could do differently if the problem happened again.
13. Ask them if the problem is solved.
14. Ask disputants to tell their friends that the conflict has been solved, to prevent rumors from spreading.
15. Congratulate students for their hard work.
16. Fill out the Conflict Manager Report Form.