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# THE VALUE OF PEER MEDIATION IN REDUCING CONFLICT BEHAVIORS

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research project was to determine if a particular peer mediation program reduced incidence of conflict on playgrounds. The difference in 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 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Both the numbers and types of conflict behavior were less ( $p < 0.05$ ) after implementation of the Conflict Management program.*

**Key words:** peer mediation, conflict, recess behavior, grades K-8

## INTRODUCTION

Elementary educators have taken a new approach at producing students who 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 (Maruyama 1992), writing on the topics of child development and education, developed a 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. This theory provided a basis for the study of education and conflict management (Maruyama 1992).

Lewin (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 a 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 © positive and negative events that are linked (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

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usually used by those students who lack self confidence and want to maintain harmonious relationships and, © 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 (Papa and Natalle 1989) report a significant difference in conflict behavior of males and females. The behavior of males and females is often based on gender stereotypes (Papa and Natalle 1989). Ashmore and Del Boca (Papa and Natalle 1989) define gender stereotypes as: "the structured sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and men." They indicate that males exhibit a dominating and competitive behavior while Shockley-Zalaback (Papa and Natalle 1989) indicates that females use prosocial, compromising, and avoiding styles. Hocker and Willmot's (Papa and Natalle 1989) research supports the theory that males and females choose their behaviors during conflicts partially because of gender identity. Terhune (Papa and Natalle 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 and McWhirter 1987). Peer mediation, allows students to practice critical thinking, problem solving, and self discipline (Lane and McWhirter 1992). Professional organizations and previous research on peer mediation has encouraged school counselors to implement peer mediation into their guidance programs (Bowman 1986).

In 1983, Reed (Satchel 1992) 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 and McWhirter 1992).

Both student behavior and school discipline problems have shown improvement as a result of peer mediation (Lane and McWhirter 1992). Other reported benefits are improved academic performance and improved behavior in classrooms (Bowman and Myrick 1987). Kelpp, Halper, and Perry reported in 1986 (Lane and McWhirter 1992) that students participating in these programs have greater credibility regarding student social interaction. McCormick reported in 1988 (Lane and McWhirter 1992) that disputants that are frequently referred for discipline problems eventually exhibited a shift toward cooperation after participating in peer mediation. Conflict management has been shown to drastically decrease the number of discipline events (Lane and McWhirter 1992). The number of discipline events dropped from 83 to 19 after 2 years at a school in Hawaii according to Araki, Takeshita, and Kadomoto in 1989 (Lane and McWhirter 1992). Also, Koch in 1988 reported that at a school in New York, the number of fights decreased by 50 percent (Lane and McWhirter 1992). An Arizona school witnessed a drop of 47 percent in their total number of discipline events per month (Lane and McWhirter 1992). The benefits for both the students and the schools will be more clearly defined as additional program evaluations are developed (Lane and McWhirter 1992).

Researchers have concluded that the process of understanding conflict resolution takes a long time (Steinberg 1991). Therefore, implementing peer mediation programs in schools, conflict resolution can become an integral component of a school's discipline plan (Lane and 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 in Clancy, Montana. The students were in grades kindergarten through eighth. Both males and females were observed.

### Procedure

The peer mediation program 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. Students receive 16 hrs of training and role play practice before they become team mediators on the playground. 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. Conflict managers work in teams of two to help disputants use proper problem solving skills (Lane and McWhirter 1992). After student managers have been trained, they assist other students in thinking about conflicts, their ideas and feelings, and discovering a solution.

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. Students were given the instructions to handle conflicts they were approached with by other students or to intervene if they felt they could handle the conflict.

The student body was also educated about conflict management through a series of class instructions about conflict management. The program itself was explained and the valuable benefits of knowing how to use conflict management in everyday life was addressed.

Effectiveness of the Conflict Management program was studied by comparing the type and number of conflicts before versus after the program was implemented. This was accomplished by comparing the means of the conflict behaviors before and after the implementation of the program. I observed student behavior on the playground by walking around the playground area and recording what was seen during morning, lunch, and afternoon recesses. Whenever playground aids had to intervene in conflict, it was reported to the researcher. Two 15-min

sessions during the 30-min morning and afternoon recesses were observed. One 30-min 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 included identical time periods.

I recorded the frequency of each of the following conflict behaviors types (CBT) during each playground session.

No outward aggression observed by any student. Students encountered one another, e.g. two students ran for the same ball or swing, but one takes the swing or ball and the other leaves.

1. Aggression by the students was minimal. There was no interference by external monitors necessary to resolve the conflict, e.g. pushing, yelling, and chasing.
2. Physical aggression, loud yelling, and/or arguing were visible. An external monitor stepped in to resolve the conflict.
3. Other variables were recorded included gender of the students, grade level present on the playground, time of the session, date, weather, and day of the week.

Data were 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.

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

A comparison of mean composite scores for CBT-1 showed a significant difference in number of incidents before and after the Conflict Management Program was implemented. (Table 1) Comparison of mean composite scores for CBT-2 showed a significant difference in the number of conflicts before and after. Mean composite scores for CBT-3 before and after implementation were also different. T-values of 2.26, 2.57, and 2.38 for the respective conflict behavior types were  $p < 0.05$  that the results occurred by chance alone. A comparison of mean composite scores for the total number of conflicts before showed a significant difference over the total number of conflicts after the Conflict Management Program was implemented. The composite t-value of 3.15 was  $p < 0.05$  that the results occurred by chance alone.

*Table 1. Test differences between means of conflict behavior observed before and after implementation of Conflict Management Program.*

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

\* = no outward aggression

\*\* = minimal aggression

\*\*\* = physical aggression or loud shouting

The extent of the difference between males and females before and after and the different grade levels before and after becomes clearer by comparing the mean scores for each of the groups tested. Mean scores are based on the total number of behaviors before and after the Conflict Management Program was implemented. Results of these comparisons are included in Table 2.

Mean scores for males (8.0667) and females before (2.4667) compared to mean scores after for males (3.466) and females (1.200) showed a significant decrease in the number of conflicts after the Conflict Management Program was implemented with males showing a more significant reduction than females.

Mean scores for the different grade levels also showed a significant difference. Grades K-3, present on the playground during 1015-1030 hrs and 1400-1415 hrs, had a before mean score of 4.7143 and an after mean score of 2.1667. Grades 4-6, on the playground during these same periods had a before mean of 4.2000 and an after mean of 2.2500. Grades 4-8 on the playground during 1200-12:30 hrs had a before mean of 8.3333 and after mean of 2.8333 and the most significant change of all the grade levels.

## DISCUSSION

Results indicated that the Conflict Management Program significantly reduced the number of conflict

behaviors on the playground. The reduction in conflict behaviors were a result of having conflict managers on the playground to help students solve problems and educating the students about conflict management. This study is congruent with previous research done 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, nonjudgemental atmosphere. According to Bondesio (1992), training is much better than just knowledge about conflicts. Training ensures prepared and able conflict managers in the schools. 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 a problem-solving process. They can help students recognize specific actions that contribute to problems, the necessary skills to negotiate, and how to generate and evaluate varied solutions (Steinberg 1991).

Table 2. Test differences between males, females, and grade levels before and after implementation of Conflict Management Program.

	Mean-Pre	Mean-Post	t-value	Significance
<b>Gender</b>				
Males	8.0667	3.4667	3.19	.05
Females	2.4667	1.2000	2.7	.05
<b>Grade</b>				
K-3	4.7143	2.1667	2.45	.05
4-6	4.2000	2.2500	1.36	.05
4-8	8.333	2.8333	1.74	.05

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

Kurt Lewin (Maruyama 1992:165) noted, "It seems easier for society to change education than for education to change society," 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."

Results of this study also supported research relevant to gender differences in conflict behavior. Males had more outward, observable conflicts than females. Most male conflicts at recess could be seen from a distance, while female conflicts had to be viewed close up in order to identify the conflicts. These behaviors were observed following the implementation of the Conflict Management Program which agreed with 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. Holtes and Kahn reported that males see conflict on the basis of strategy and their goal is to maximize their gains (Papa and Natalie 1989). Whereas females in conflict tend to accommodate in order to be social. Females will compete, however, in order not to look like a failure. Roloff and Greenberg

(Papa and Natalie 1989) indicated that the only assertive-strategy females prefer to use is verbal aggressiveness, but would prefer to use prosocial means and regression.

A study of high school students by Roloff and Greenberg in 1979 (Papa and Natalie 1989) indicated that at the high school level males prefer aggression, revenge, and verbal aggression to resolve their conflicts. Educators can counteract these typical stereotypes if they interact with students at a young age. 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."

Replication and improvement of this study could include the use of video cameras, more individuals observing student behavior on the playground, and increased amount of observation time.

Further, direct feedback from staff and students would provide researchers an opportunity to use the information to help interpret the results obtained. 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 a 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 and McWhirter, 1992).

Although conflict is a part of human existence, teachers, counselors, and administrators should be working on ways to reach more students. Peer mediation programs are an ideal way to achieve this goal.

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## 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.