

scottish mediation network

Common challenges for peer mediation, and some potential solutions (looking at sustainability)

- Raising awareness
- Raising usage of service
- Reducing problems with service
- Ensuring sustainability



Peer Mediators in Scotland
Getting Together

During the first year of Young Talk (SMN) we have spoken to many young peer mediators out in schools about the challenges that they experience in their mediation practice. This document summarises these challenges and offers potential solutions as learnt through sharing best practice between schools.

A common challenge for many peer mediation services in schools is that pupils are not aware of the existence of the service after implementation, or indeed are aware of it but not using it. Alternatively, another common issue that schools face is pupils using the service for the wrong things (things that are not appropriate for peer mediation) or not taking the service seriously, sometimes simply going to mediation and making up things.

So partly what may be required in these situations is looking at how to get the right word out there about peer mediation in the school in the first place (=raising awareness). There may be a need to re-inform pupils in the school about peer mediation to make sure everyone has heard about it and has a good understanding of it. The more talk about peer mediation the better. Spreading the word can be done in various ways; through talking about it at assembly and doing a role-play (or showing a film) with examples of different scenarios; forming a publicity and promotion committee (within the peer mediation team) which is responsible for creating informational material for peer mediation; talking about it in class etc. Some schools put up big posters with the mediator and disputant rules as a way of making the peer mediation process for transparent and raising awareness about it in the school. Other schools put up tables and stalls at school events and hand out information about peer mediation. Similarly many schools include information and updates about peer mediation on their school website and in-school magazines and newsletters.

In raising awareness and use of peer mediation services it is also important to make sure that all teachers and staff within the school have a good understanding of peer mediation and are supportive of it. In order for this to happen it may be needed to engage more with teachers/staff especially within guidance faculty and pupil support to make sure they are on board with peer mediation. Engaging with teachers and staff to inform them about peer mediation is the responsibility of the adult peer mediation coordinator (and can be supported by an external peer mediation trainer) at the school, but the young peer mediators themselves can play a useful role in

demonstrating the use and benefits of peer mediation. It is also very worthwhile to consider not just administrative, teaching and support staff but also other staff such as janitorial staff who may be interacting with pupils on a day to day basis. Ideally, a school will have the majority of teachers and staff actually trained in peer mediation practices to ensure sustainability and success. This can happen by arranging a staff-led training where certain members of staff who have been trained by external trainers can themselves deliver the training within the school. There is a **Train the Trainer** (Peer Mediation) course which schools can apply to have delivered through Young Talk and the Scottish Mediation Network for free (or other training provides, at a cost). This course gives staff within schools the knowledge, tools and resources to deliver peer mediation training within their schools. If Train the Trainer is not an option, schools can also use the peer mediation training resources and tools to deliver their own peer mediation training within their own schools, with the help of the trained staff and pupils. Thus schools can **create a staff/pupil-delivered training** so new peer mediators can join the team. A committee can be started to put some peer mediators in charge of training new members of the team with the help of adult coordinators. Basically, it is important to think about how training of new peer mediators and staff/teachers will happen.

This touches upon another major barrier to success within schools - that only one cohort of peer mediators are trained and when they leave, the peer mediation service stops. Similarly sometimes the adult responsible for the service moves on to another school or post. So again, in order to ensure the sustainability of the service, schools need the skills to deliver peer mediation training to pupils in-house. They also need a team of adults supporting the service so in case someone leaves other team members can keep it going. Therefore it is important to have a plan in place for the sustainability of peer mediation and in-house training (whether it be staff training staff, staff training pupils, or pupils training pupils). It is also important in terms of sustainability to make sure that a variety of pupils across years are trained, so they can take peer mediation up the years with them and make sure the service does not stop when one year group leaves.

Another way of raising awareness and ensuring the service is known to pupils is by looking at the referral system. It may be that at a particular school it works better for the guidance department, pupil support assistants or teaching staff referring cases rather than self-referral, or the other way around. Teachers/staff referring cases may be a way of getting the service started, making pupils aware of peer mediation (although participation in mediation should always be voluntary of course). Or it may be that the way of self-referring needs to be different, maybe more anonymous or more accessible for pupils to use it more. The referral process is also an opportunity to check that the case is appropriate for mediation in the first place - to limit the risks of pupils not taking mediation seriously, or making things up, or having a case that shouldn't be mediated but rather dealt with by adults and restorative practices. It is often advisable to have separate sessions with both parties before putting them in the same room for the same reasons. It may be the case that pupils who self-refer to mediation and then don't take the process seriously have some root issues that need to be addressed. Moreover, sometimes pupils may not want their peers to know they are going to peer mediation, so making sure there is a way for pupils to self-refer without others knowing is useful.

Finally another barrier to pupils using the peer mediation service may be a lack of trust for the peer mediators, or belief in their ability to help in a situation. One way of addressing this is to select peer mediators from varied social groups, ages and genders – ensuring that pupils can relate to the peer

mediators. It may take some time for the pupils in the school to get to know the peer mediation team and trust the peer mediators and the process. Building a positive reputation for the peer mediation service is important for a successful programme, and may not happen overnight. One way of building trust and positive image is combining peer mediation with other conflict-resolution and anti-bullying services with the school that focus on building strong, positive relationships. This way the peer mediators can gain a positive reputation before mediation takes place. Moreover, it is also important to make sure that the peer mediators feel confident and comfortable in their mediation practice as this may be another barrier to the peer mediation service being successful. Thus it is important to make sure that the peer mediators feel they have had adequate training and experience to take on conflict resolution within their school. It may be that refresher training after long breaks and holidays is useful, and also a way of keeping peer mediators motivated. Sometimes it takes a while for peer mediation to become established in the school, so it may also be the case that the first year is a bit of a trial year in figuring out what works and what doesn't work.

A final important point in raising awareness and understanding of peer mediation is reaching parents and families. It is important for the overall success of the peer mediation service that parents have a good understanding of peer mediation and are supportive of it – otherwise this may impact on the pupils' attitudes toward peer mediation. Ways of informing parents of peer mediation may be through sending letters home with the children/young people explaining the process and benefits of peer mediation and also publishing material on the school website. It can also be an option to invite parents to a special assembly (or parent's night/parent's council meeting) to shed light on what peer mediation is and why it is being used.

Another potential barrier to a successful peer mediation service may be how the peer mediation works practically – is the space comfortable and appropriate, is the time of mediation a good one etc. These things can also affect whether pupils use the peer mediation service or not.

In terms of facing some of these issues it can also be very useful, if not down-right necessary, to take a broader perspective as well, and think about some solutions that work on a grander scale. For example, the best way to ensure a successful peer mediation service at a secondary school is to have successful peer mediation services in the feeding primary schools. Therefore collaborations between primary and secondary schools in a learning community are very important (and also very motivating for peer mediators). Such collaborations also help with the transition between primary and secondary. Similarly collaborations between one primary school and another, or one secondary school with another secondary school, within the same community may also be very useful in sharing experiences, advice and best practice. It may also be very valuable for schools to have other local mediation or conflict resolution services supporting their school service, to offer both children and adults support and guidance. For example, links between local schools and universities (especially if the university has a mediation team or service) are very beneficial. Similarly links between local mediation services (SACRO has many of these, or The Scottish Community Mediation Centre) and local school clusters are useful for the same purposes. Finally, peer mediation works within a nurturing context and by taking a whole-school approach – the principles and practices of peer mediation must be implemented throughout the whole school, and ideally re-inforced by other preventative and restorative practices that nurture pupils.