



Peer mediation – What does the research say? How does it work within the framework of the Scottish curriculum?

Conflicts are an inescapable and essential part of life, diversity and change. How do we use these possibilities for growth in our schools to promote learning and wellbeing?

Peer mediation - what is it?

Peer mediation is the process whereby school children and young people help their peers handle and sort out their disagreements and arising conflicts. These conflicts can range from spreading rumours to fights in the playground. Thus, peer mediation is simply pupils helping their peers to resolve conflict in safe and positive ways, and peer mediation training is the process of giving pupils the knowledge, tools and skills to become peer mediators. Peer mediation sessions are always co-mediated, meaning two pupils will sit down together to mediate a conflict between two peers who are having a conflict or disagreement.

What are the benefits of peer mediation for school communities?

First of all, research shows that pupils who do engage in aggressive behaviour have limited knowledge and social skills in resolving conflicts in a constructive manner. The standard response of these pupils to conflict is either withdrawing or forcing a situation. A well-conducted peer mediation program teaches children and young people alternative strategies to aggression and withdrawal that instead promote constructive communication and a safe school environment (Stomfay-Stitz, 1994; Sim, Whiteside, Dittner, & Mellon, 2006; Smith-Sanders & Harter, 2007)

Extensive research (incl. review papers) on peer mediation programs show that they are indeed successful in improving school climate by teaching students to constructively deal with conflict. This in turn reduces student-to-student conflict as well as suspensions and discipline referrals, and further improves relationships between peers as well as between pupils and teachers – creating a healthy school climate. Results from peer mediation programs show that when conflict arises and is dealt with by a peer mediator, there is around a 90% agreement rate and satisfaction of outcome by pupils. Similarly, teachers and parents are also highly satisfied with the outcomes of mediation sessions (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Cardells & Van Slyck, 1999; McHenry, 2000; Burrell et al. 2003, Harris, 2005).

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What are the specific cognitive/emotional benefits for pupils?

Specifically, peer mediation programs have been shown to lead to improvement in controlling anger, developing appropriate assertiveness skills, and learning problem solving skills, communication/language skills and other interpersonal skills, as well as increasing empathy, trust, tolerance, respect, and fairness. For student mediators themselves, learning the mediation process has been shown to increase self-esteem, and even improve academic achievement (Thompson 1996; Bodine & Crawford 1998; Cardells & Van Slyck, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; 2005). Mediators experience their ability to make a profound difference in the lives of others, and their contribution is valued by adults and students alike – this has a positive, upward spiral effect (Cohen, 2005).

Do these benefits extend beyond the school environment?

Yes, studies have shown that participation in peer mediation training gives pupils skills to use in their lives outside of the classroom and school, and has a significant impact on the strategies pupils use to resolve conflicts in their homes. Thus, being a mediator helps students approach conflict in their own lives and in their communities with new perspective and skill (Johnson, Johnson & Dudley, 1992; Johnson et al. 1995; Cohen, 2005; Harris, 2005).

What does peer mediation training actually involve?

During peer mediation training, peer mediation trainers deliver and facilitate the training program to pupils in a school. The sessions involve learning about the background of peer mediation in Scotland and the wider framework in which peer mediation takes place. The peer mediation trainers engage pupils in various activities to learn mediation skills in a fun and participatory way, using guidelines and provided material. Pupils are also taught the five stages of a mediation process and given opportunities to practice applying their knowledge and using their new skills during the training session. Information and support is given by the educators on how to set up, sustain and maintain peer mediation projects.

Peer mediation within the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence framework

Peer mediation training equips schools with the necessary tools to meet pupils' psychosocial needs and thereby enhances multi-faceted learning and as such aligns with the goals of The Curriculum for Excellence (= to ensure all children and young people develop attributes, knowledge, and skills to flourish in life, learning and work, Scottish Executive 2004). The curriculum aims to enable each child to become a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen, and effective contributors – this means finding innovating ways of using resources to broaden the scope for teaching, and the role of the school in providing children with essential life and social skills. Peer mediation essentially uses an extra-curricular distraction (interpersonal conflict) as a teaching tool, and enables pupils to learn from an

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already present and vital part of their school lives. This meets both the needs of schools as educational institutions, the needs of children and young people to flourish, and also the needs of educators within schools, in a manner which is cost and time efficient. Peer mediation training allows for schools to tap into their students learning potential while creating balanced, safe and positive learning environments.

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