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THE BENEFITS OF PEER MEDIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN CONFLICT AND PROGRAM STATUS

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Much research on the topic of violence prevention tends to survey the effectiveness of programs, including peer mediation, without attention to how programs are instituted and maintained in schools. This study of a high school peer mediation program examines several aspects of the process including the training of student mediators, the curriculum, the dynamics of actual mediation sessions, and the comments of mediators and trainers as they described the process. Peer mediation defines conflict in a way that prevents examination of certain conflict issues, especially those related to inequity and prejudice. Whereas peer mediation is designed to resolve conflicts in schools, it is the mediators themselves who benefit most from the programs—not the disputants.

New state and federal initiatives and greater concerns about violence have led to increased interest in peer mediation programs in schools. This interest has been fueled as well by funding through Goals 2000, the Safe Schools Act, and other policies and initiatives during the 1990s that have made available support for peer mediation training and program implementation. The result of this policy

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and these greater concerns about violence—combined with actual needs to address violence in constructive ways in schools—has been an almost frenzied race to set up mediation programs in schools. The National Association of Mediation in Education estimated that in 1994 there were between 5,000 and 8,000 conflict resolution programs in the United States; currently, there is hardly a school that does not have a mediation program or is not anticipating the development of one (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Unique about peer mediation is the wealth of support it obtains from teachers, students, administrators, researchers, and politicians (Bey, 1996; Reiss & Roth, 1993). There is hardly a group that does not extol its virtues, and although there are some researchers and school staff skeptical of its long-term benefits, faith in such programs is at an all-time high. They are deemed capable of not only decreasing incidents of violence in schools and communities but of raising academic achievement and increasing test scores (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

The foundations of peer mediation can be found in various philosophies of conflict resolution, in some aspects of behaviorism, and in the social learning theories associated with Albert Bandura and other cognitive psychologists. Undergirding peer mediation is the belief that conflict can be good—that it is crucial to the moral development of children, their acquisition of a sense of social order, and development of communicative ability (Hale, Farley-Lucas, & Tardy, 1996). Rather than take a negative view, peer mediation—similar to most conflict resolution strategies—aims to view conflict as necessary and even positive. Johnson and Johnson (1996) suggested that schools not only mediate conflicts but also promote and encourage conflict “and be conflict-positive rather than conflict-negative organizations” (p. 465). To do this, students are trained to be mediators so that when fellow students have disputes, they can meet with the disputants to help them to solve their problems in a positive way that prevents more serious conflict that may otherwise erupt. This logic suggests that violence in school is alleviated when disputants have a means of airing their grievances in the presence of trained mediators who are capable of employing forms of conflict resolution strategies to create win-win situations whereby disputants agree not to fight and learn from their experiences.

Meanwhile, there is another rationale for peer mediation programs that suggests that violence in schools is alleviated not when disputants are mediated but when mediators learn conflict resolution skills. The logic in this case is as follows: When students are trained to mediate disputes in their schools, the training teaches them not only how to mediate but also how to solve their own disputes—in school, in their communities, and with their families—throughout their lives. When students are trained in peer mediation, the training itself is a form of antiviolence education, which is seen as a means of teaching students to recognize warning signs of violence and manners of avoiding dangerous relationships (Hilton, Harris, Rice, Smith Krans, & Lavigne, 1998). The point in this case is to get as many students trained as mediators as possible and to therefore inundate society with individuals who possess the skills to resolve conflicts nonviolently (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, & Magnuson, 1995). Here, it is the training itself and not the mediation process that leads to decreased incidents of violence. Given these two scenarios, we are led to a crossroad regarding peer mediation programs: Who should benefit from peer mediation—the disputants or the mediators? When evaluating a peer mediation program, should one evaluate how effective it is for the mediators or for the mediated?

This crossroad is traversed by suggesting that peer mediation has a lasting effect on both the mediated and the mediators as well as the community around the school and the families of students who undergo the mediation process (Johnson et al., 1995). This ideal situation is given impetus by diffusion theory or what is sometimes referred to as the *peace virus* (Crary, 1992). This theory suggests that peer mediation programs—and all violence prevention programs—have a spreading effect. Mediators learn conflict resolution skills that help them in their lives both in and outside of school (Johnson & Johnson, 1995a). In addition, when disputants are mediated, they too learn how to solve conflicts nonviolently (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Laginski, & O'Coin, 1996). According to diffusion theory, students who mediate as well as those who get mediated take what they have learned into their communities and households. Thus, families and society as well as the school and individual students benefit from the mediation process (Harrington & Merry, 1988).

Those who have a more critical view of violence prevention programs such as peer mediation cite several factors that often block this ideal scenario from occurring. Based on evaluations of three violence prevention programs—Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents, Community Violence Prevention Program, and Positive Adolescent Choices Training—the authors of one study concluded that violence prevention programs do not produce long-term changes in violent behavior or decrease the risk of victimization (Johnson & Johnson, 1995b). Its ineffectiveness is caused by the following: Many programs are poorly targeted, the programs provide materials but do not focus on program implementation, proponents of violence prevention programs confuse programs that work in neighborhoods with those that work in schools, and many programs are unrealistic. The authors argued that schools need to go beyond violence prevention to conflict resolution programs. The difference here is subtle yet important. Conflict resolution does not aim to eliminate all conflicts. In addition, conflict resolution would require schools to create a more cooperative environment (e.g., use cooperative learning), to decrease in-school risk factors (e.g., competitive, noncaring, and short-term relationships), to use academic controversy to increase learning (they need to show how conflict arises in everyday life and is not always negative), and finally, to teach all students how to resolve conflicts constructively.

BACKGROUND ON THE RESEARCH

What follows is a case study of a peer mediation program in an urban high school that takes up these issues of who does and does not benefit and how individuals benefit from peer mediation programs. It combines ethnographic and participant observation research to examine the everyday workings of peer mediation at

Brandon High School in New York State.[1] The research was conducted during the 1997 to 1998 school year for about 5 to 10 hours each week. The data were drawn from four sources: observations of the peer mediation training of student mediators, observations of 17 peer mediation sessions during the school year, 37 open-ended interviews with peer mediators and staff organizers, and data compiled from school records kept about the mediations and those who were mediated. As ethnographic, the research was qualitative, focused on the context of the program, and took seriously the notion that all school activities, including peer mediation, are infused with a "continual process of creating meaning in social and material contexts" (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 13; also see Fetterman, 1988; Lincoln, 1988). Not only did I observe the mediation training of students and subsequent mediations, at times I participated in some aspects of the activities. During the training, I helped organize students into role-playing groups, conducted a role-playing session, and joined in on group conversations, especially when adults in the room were urged to talk. Not only did I sometimes want to help people, I wanted to "get a feel for what things meant for the actors," which is done through action-oriented and participatory research (Weiss, 1998, p. 257).

The research began with participant observations of the 22-hour peer mediation training of students that took place during the past week of summer in the high school library. During the training, copious field notes were taken. I also had opportunities to talk to and informally interview the trainers, school counselor, and students participating in the program. I often took notes while having these discussions with the participants and later used the notes to write out the content—as verbatim as possible—of these interviews. After the training of students, I began interviewing the new mediators about the program. I was careful to emphasize that participation in the study was voluntary and that data was confidential; for all student interviews, parent/guardian permission letters were signed and returned. The interviews were conducted in the library of the school, in an office made available to me by a school counselor, and in other places where I felt students would speak freely. During the school year, I interviewed students about actual disputes that they had mediated. In addition to the new trainees, mediators who had been trained in previous years were interviewed. I also interviewed the school counselor and special education teacher who oversaw the mediation program and the school psychologist, all of whom participated with students in mediations.

During the school year, I also had opportunities to observe mediations as they were conducted. Most mediations were not scheduled; rather, when students where in conflict they would be sent immediately to mediation. Therefore, I could not schedule times to observe the sessions. My observations were made possible by the fact that I spent a significant amount of time in the school and was usually available to attend mediations on the spur of the moment. During most sessions, I sat away from the mediation table so that I could take notes without disturbing the process. I told all participants—including the disputants—that I was conducting research and would leave the room if anybody desired it, which did not occur. As with the observation data acquired during the training, the mediation field notes were transcribed into narrative descriptions in which I noted how people acted, what they said, and how they interacted with one another. School documents were also kept about the mediations, and after obtaining permission from the principal, I reviewed the reports, which contained information about the context and causes of disputes that went to mediation, the number of mediations that took place, and background information about the disputants.

All of my field notes were coded; then, the codes were condensed according to themes. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded as well. Hypotheses were inductively generated from the coded materials through a process associated with grounded theory in which hypotheses are derived by “producing complex, conceptually woven, integrated theory,” which is discovered and formulated through intensive analysis and coding of the data (Strauss, 1993, p. 22). There were four general categories of codes that were developed; these were congruent with categories that Anselm Strauss noted as essential to most qualitative research (Strauss, 1993). These included conditions, interactions among actors, strategies and tactics, and consequences. An open coding procedure was followed during the initial phase of coding—an unrestricted coding scheme that requires a line-by-line analysis of the data—whereby analytical themes were developed. I then used an axial coding method that focuses attention of particular themes and developed codes within these themes. As major themes and their complexities emerged, I coded more selectively, analyzing once again the data for particular themes that had emerged during the initial open and axial coding processes. My intention was not only to identify common themes and how they interacted in the context of the program but also to understand the various stages of the program—from training to actual mediations—from the perspectives of those involved.

Also included as data were the booklets, handouts, and articles that schools distributed about peer mediation. These texts too were coded, and hypotheses generated inductively. In the tradition of school ethnography, the study not only evaluated the program but focused on the everyday events and rituals, the assumptions and taken-for-granted facts that undergirded the program and were therefore in many ways invisible to the developers and participants involved (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Payne, 1994). Unlike most research on peer mediation that evaluates and surveys programs for effectiveness and misses the complexity of interactions in mediation sessions, this research focuses on the production of peer mediation within the context of the school and students' lives in a manner often associated with cultural studies (Casella, 1999; Giroux, 1996). It is also meant to examine the challenges that must be dealt with for a program to adequately address the complex issues that inevitably come to the mediation table.

THE CITY AND SCHOOL

Brandon High School, where the research was conducted, was one of four public high schools in a midsize city in New York state. It was located on the south side of the city, parts of which were poor and mostly African American; other sections were affluent and mostly White. The area around the school often received attention in school and community meetings as a particularly troubled side of the city. Similar to others in New York state, the city has been devastated by downsizing and the shift away from the manufacturing economy that provided most of the jobs in the city. In 1965, the city population was about 219,000, and it was projected that it would rise to 222,000 by 1980. But by 1990, the population had dropped to about 163,000 inhabitants; the median household income was about $21,000, and slightly more than 22% of the people lived in poverty (Bureau of the Census, 1990; City Chamber of Commerce, 1965). Although Irish, German, and Italians still made up about 40% of the city's population in 1990, in the past three decades, many of the middle- to upper-class Italians, Irish, Germans, Jews, and other Euro-Americans left the city for the expanding suburbs, and the African American population has more than doubled, most arriving from the South.

Many of the people who left the city were those with children who began to lose faith in the city school system. Student enrollment in the city dropped from about 30,000 students to just more than 23,000 between 1960 and 1990. About half of the 1,400 students in Brandon High were Black, some from middle-class backgrounds. About 45% of students were White, and there was a minority of Native American, Asian, and Latino students. Many students came from professional and secure families; others did not. Forty percent of the students were eligible for the free-lunch program. There was one principal, four assistant principals, five counselors, and about 90 teachers in the school. In addition to peer mediation, the school had a DARE program, a Student Support Team, and school police officer and several guards. Although not thought of as a particularly violent school by most, the school did have its share of violent confrontations. Between September 1, 1997, and June 15, 1998, 128 students were suspended for fighting in school.

WHAT PEER MEDIATION DOES—AND DOES NOT DO

What peer mediation does for a school and for students partly depends on what the school and students use it for. When peer mediation is developed as a means to convey to students a set of skills that will teach them to alter mismanaged behavior without improving the circumstances of students' lives that provoke conflict, as was often the case at Brandon High, sessions will rarely address the realities of life in poor and isolated cities. As researchers go back and forth arguing either the benefits or the ineffectiveness of school-based peer mediation programs, drawing great subtleties between add-on approaches, whole school approaches, and conflict resolution as opposed to peer mediation programs, what remains a challenge is to contend with the long histories of the individuals involved and the issues of poverty, neglect, race, power, control, and sexuality that are often the foundations on which city students' conflicts occur. When peer mediation programs lose sight of the realities of life in poor cities, it joins with other programs and policies that view youth misbehavior as essentially personal or individual matters—a problem having to do with their own cognitive and sometimes neurological deficits.

The training of students for mediation combines didactic teaching about conflict with several hours of students role-playing mediation sessions. During the process, students learned to define *conflict* in particular ways. It was generally taught through both the curriculum and in daily informal reminders by the trainer that conflict was inevitable and could be resolved by having disputants state their feelings and learn to change their behavior by altering the conflict situation. The basic principles of conflict included, as outlined in one lesson, the following:

1. Conflict is an inevitable part of life.
2. In conflict situations, both parties want to win. We must believe that both parties can win.
3. Conflict signals a need for change.
4. Conflict can result in a learning experience.
5. Conflict can be positive and productive. If people express their feelings and needs in a positive and constructive way, it reduces anxiety and prevents the escalation of conflict.

This definition had consequences on how students conducted their mediations throughout the year. For example, students learned to respect human diversity, but they also learned that conflict was the result of inappropriate behavior, for which various forms of behavior modification techniques were recommended. Ultimately, the focus on the individual and his or her behavior often overshadowed the possibility of examining in detail the complex sexual, economic, and racial issues that came before mediators.

Peer mediation is an extracurricular activity and should be seen in this context of the school. Although different in significant ways from other extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and honor societies, mediation shares with them a certain amount of prestige and respect that comes with active involvement in the program. In the words of one mediator, “It’s what I do to look good to the school but mostly to colleges.” Similar to most extracurricular activities, the peer mediation program was generally participated in by the most active and high-achieving students—usually students who were already members of other kinds of extracurricular endeavors. Mediators and school staff who organized the program recognized the importance of being a part of the peer mediation team for it brought both students and the school recognition. In such cases, programs are developed to benefit mediators—not those who have disagreements—although some disputants benefit as well. Peer mediation is a conflict resolution service in school; but it is also an extracurricular activity that high-achieving students use to better their life experiences and opportunities. It is a resume booster. Unfortunately, those who could use the boost the most are not involved in the program—except as those who get mediated.

PEER MEDIATION AT BRANDON HIGH

In spite of news articles in the city newspaper reporting fighting on the rise at Brandon High and a Time Warner news program produced by a local media organization about violence in the city that focused in part on the schools, Brandon High had a reputable peer mediation program. Among other honors, the program won the JC Penny Golden Rule Award and was granted a New York State Certificate of Excellence from a state senator. These honors were proudly displayed in the trophy case in one hallway of the school along with a photograph of the mediators in Albany accepting their

New York State award on the steps of the capitol building. During the 1991 to 1992 school year, the guidance counselors at Brandon High developed the program based on the belief that students themselves needed to resolve fellow-student conflicts and that violence was best addressed when individuals learned from the conflict resolution process. A handbook distributed by the Brandon Mediation Team called *When We Listen, People Talk!* noted,

> Traditional interventions teach students that adult authority figures are needed to resolve conflicts. Adults are forced into the role of arbitrators, determining what is and is not acceptable behavior. Students are frequently disciplined (expulsion, suspension, time-out rooms, scolding) in an effort to control and manage their behavior. This approach does not empower students. While adults may become more skillful in controlling students, students do not learn the procedures, skills and attitudes required to resolve conflict constructively. With peer mediation, they do.

New Peace, Inc., a city-based, nonprofit conflict resolution service, provided the training for the peer mediation program at Brandon High. New Peace was founded in 1981 and was funded by the Office of Court Administration. It was part of the city court system and was used by the judicial branch as an alternative to small claims court. Tanya Williams, a mediator with New Peace and the trainer at Brandon High, remarked in an interview that "about five years ago, New Peace got into the prevention side of conflict—that's how we ended up working here at Brandon." Their involvement accompanied, as well, the new monies made available in the early 1990s for violence prevention in schools. Tanya Williams was Latina, lively, and a skilled educator. She noted during her first day of training for the new student mediators that she had been doing the training since 1991 and that incidences of violence at Brandon High had gone down 63% since then.

The students who volunteer to participate receive 22 hours of training during the summer. The 14 students taking part in the training for the 1997 to 1998 year were in 10th and 11th grades. Eight were girls, 6 were boys; 10 were White, 4 were African American. Guidelines for the peer mediation program were many, although they were not always followed. They included confidentiality, once-a-month in-service meetings, and a 75% grade point average 90% of the time. Mediators were on call 1 day every 10 days, but teachers had the discretion to not permit a student mediator to leave class for a mediation, although this rarely occurred. Most teachers in the school supported the peer mediation program if for no other reason than it gave them a venue to dismiss unruly students.

In general, the adult developers of the program tried to convey to students that being part of the peer mediation program was a privilege, a responsibility, and therefore required of them serious consideration and work. The school system coordinator of the program noted that there had been 900 mediation sessions at Brandon High since the program began and only two fights. These statistics used by the adult developers of the program—that there had only been two fights in the school and that violent incidents have decreased 63% since the inception of the program—reflect artful play with numbers rather than reality. Teachers that I interviewed complained of increasing incidents of violence in the school; in the first 4 months of the school year alone, 60 students were suspended for fighting (see Table 1).

CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS OF DIFFERENCE

Peer mediation training taught students that most disputes were a matter of disagreements and misunderstandings that could be resolved through purposeful talk. They were also taught that mediation existed to give disputants a channel for airing their grievances and working toward an agreement that all parties could feel good about. In interviews with students, many remembered the importance of creating win-win situations—along with confidentiality, remaining neutral, and having disputants talk about their feelings—as crucial aspects of mediation. Students were not only taught procedures for conducting a mediation but also were taught how to think about conflict within the context of individual goals and relationships between people (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). How a defi-

TABLE 1
Statistics on Mediations From September 4, 1997, to December 17, 1997

Total number of mediations: 66
  Causes of disputes
  Threats: 30
  Rumors: 10
  Name-calling: 6
  Physical fighting: 12
  Verbal fighting: 8
Number of disputants involved: 136
Number of disputants who were African American: 97
Number of disputants who were White: 31
Number of disputants who were other (mostly Latino): 5
Number of disputants who were female: 94 (including 1 teacher)
Number of disputants who were male: 40
Number of disputants whose race and gender were uncertain: 2
Number of repeat offenders: 18
Number of mediations that were between African American and White disputants: 6
Number of mediations that were between African American and Latino disputants: 2
Number of mediations that were between Latino and White disputants: 3
Number of mediations that were between African American and African American students: 45
Number of mediations that were between White and White students: 10
Number of students in the school (according to the 1997-1998 census): 1,309
Number of students who were African American: 633
Number of students who were White: 598
Number of students who were other (mostly Latino): 77
Ratio of girls and boys: About 50-50

nition of conflict got created and influenced the mediation process depended on teaching students that conflict was inevitable and not necessarily negative. Tanya Williams began training by telling the students that "conflict is neither positive or negative. It's a part of life. Everyone is going to have conflict," and concluded in her instruction that conflict, then, was "a signal for change." Inevitably, change had to come from the disputants, through their efforts to reach an agreement that both could support and abide by. John Devine (1996) saw this as not only foundational to peer mediation but a way of "locating violence primarily in the students, in their homes, in the community, on the streets—anywhere but in the structure of the school itself" (p. 163).

Similar to other social interventions that aim to change behavior, students with the most problems are called on to solve their problems by changing the way they act—and adults are free to leave intact the school structures and economic systems that have been identified as factors that exacerbate violence (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998; Petersen, Pietrzak, & Speaker, 1998; Short, 1997). Throughout the training, students were taught that conflict was primarily caused by individual differences between people and subsequent misbehaviors that could be altered. The construction of conflict in this manner was made evident on the first day of training when students were asked to line up on either side of a line on the floor, to clasp hands, and to try to pull the other person over the line using one hand. Most students enjoyed the activity and once settled back in their seats, losers were asked how they felt about losing, winners about winning: Students gave typical responses, that it did not feel good to lose, that it felt good to win. The lesson of the activity was that individuals should learn to "straddle the line" and to therefore create win-win situations. Creating a win-win situation was a matter of having disputants, according to the trainer, "see from the other person's perspective" and then "managing and getting them to change their behaviors" to create an agreement. Alluding to the activity, she said, "when we use force, one ends up feeling good and the other bad. You can act differently and you can get people to do so by avoiding pulling people over lines, and create agreements in the process instead."

The focus on conflict as mismanaged, although alterable, behavior was evident in the basic tenets of peer mediation. The executive director of New Peace, who conducted part of the training at Brandon High, said that the structure of mediation harks back to basic theories about reflective listening—which in the context of mediation meant listening carefully and trying to be reflective about each disputant's viewpoint of the problem (Apter & Goldstein, 1986; Fisher & Ury, 1981; Goldstein, Harootunian, & Conoley, 1994). The executive director of New Peace was a middle-aged man, White, who had worked his way up the ranks of the nonprofit organization. In an interview he explained,

> The basic ideas about mediation haven't changed much over the years. Reflective listening, getting disputants to express their feelings, getting people to locate where they have common ground—things in common—and that kind of thing, getting them to make some tries to solve their problems and having students trained to do this is what it's all about. It's a business too and we have practical concerns about effectiveness, but the main point is to deal with conflict in a pro-conflict way.

In her observation of a mediation program in Cleveland, Kathleen Vail (1998) noted a similar strategy employed in peer mediation where "kids are encouraged to vent their feelings . . . and mediators keep track of possible solutions but don't make suggestions unless they're asked" (p. 23). During the training at Brandon High, the notion of reflective listening was reiterated several times in this context of "remaining neutral" and "working out agreements." During a role-play exercise, for example, student mediators were urged to practice reflective listening as a way of "creating understandings." The trainers who came in to help with the role-playing exercises kept telling students to "restate the problem" out loud as a way of clarifying what disputants were saying but to refrain from making any judgments. In the words of one trainer, students were required to remain neutral "to provide an objective assessment of the immediate dispute at hand." These basic assumptions about neutrality were seen as well in the curriculum used by New Peace (New Peace, 1997, p. 12). In their training materials was a page that described neutrality with the following chart:

Neutrality	*Techniques*
Don't take sides	Express empathy, not sympathy
Don't judge	Describe, don't evaluate
Don't give your opinion	Focus on process
Don't give solutions	Help them explore their choices

It was required of students that they not judge, give their opinions, or suggest solutions to problems presented by disputants. By asking open-ended questions, summarizing everything that was said, and urging disputants to come up with their own solutions, mediators were taught that disputants, given the right kinds of questioning and care, will come to see how they have acted inappropriately. It was not asked of students that they pursue issues—of poverty, sexuality, power, control, and racism—that seemed to bubble beneath the surface of most disputes I observed in the school in general and in mediation sessions. In role-playing exercises, students were reminded that they should try to focus on what students agreed on (common ground), not on issues that caused tension. One New Peace trainer urged student mediators not to repeat or focus on any offending words that the disputants may say because "you want to take the sting out of words." According to the trainers, this too creates understanding by "defusing" hostile situations. The importance of defusing hostile situations, remaining neutral, taking the sting out of words, and focusing on individual behavior were practices that many newly trained mediators remembered in interviews months later. After one new student mediator conducted a mediation in December of 1997, she noted that the dispute was about one girl calling another girl "a whore" and that she worked to show the two disputants that they should not "take such words seriously." She noted,

> It's important to defuse the situation. In a he said/she said kind of thing [students calling each other names], the words really don't mean anything because they're just pretty much words. People shouldn't even worry about it because the words don't mean anything.

When asked, "But what if the words are very hurtful, even racist or sexist?" the student responded, "I'd just tell them you can talk it out with the person instead of saying 'Oh well, I'm just going to beat her up' or something like that. The words are pretty much meaningless." In general, students were guided through a means of dealing with conflict in a way that entailed a respectful engagement with people's feelings. Conflict was resolved by taking into account people's individual differences and misunderstandings. Then, mediators were required to work to have disputants "reexamine their behaviors" by first determining the relationship of the disputants, then examining the issues that resulted in the conflict, and finally, assessing the feelings of the disputants. Once these were clarified, student mediators attempted to create win-win situations by having disputants explain ways that they could alter their behaviors to change the issues that resulted in the conflict. The most common question as mediators moved to the agreement phase at the end of mediation sessions was directed at the disputants: "What can you do to solve this problem?"

The student mediators, who were for the most part good students, learned well the lessons of the training. Other research as well has noted that students can recall months later what they had learned during their mediation training (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In spite of problems, students—both mediators and some disputants—benefited from the program, but not in ways often thought. Students benefited by being part of a respected team of mediators (an issue I will discuss shortly), and disputants benefited when their conflicts were simple enough to be resolved by a peer mediation process. But many mediations involved issues that surpassed simple forms of conflict, and for these more complex conflicts, student mediators were often unprepared. Administrators in the school were not blind to this fact. As one adult mediator and special education teacher noted: "I think mediation is a good communication tool that we have here in the building. I think it works for some kids—it works for rational people, with people who have small, resolvable problems."

Unfortunately, many disputes are not caused by small resolvable problems, and the disputants can seem irrational. Researchers have documented the kinds of violence that occur in schools and in doing so have pointed out how they are inevitably linked to social and racial hierarchies, people's status in the schools, identities, sexuality, yearnings to be respected, and impositions of power and control (Canada, 1995; Katz, 1995; Pinderhughes, 1997; Soriano, Soriano, & Jimenez, 1994). Ultimately, then, student mediators grappled with issues that were not addressed in the training. This included fighting that went on between boys and girls that often involved sexual harassment, which Stein (1995) rightly saw as one of the most prevalent forms of violence in schools. Although student mediators often attempted to grapple seriously and effectively with girl/boy disputes, they were often incapable. The following is an example of this taken from an interview with a mediator after she had conducted her first mediation, one involving a boy and a girl. The mediator was a student who I knew from the training. She described the experience:

> The girl who was fighting sat [at the mediation table]. She talked . . . but we kind of got stuck because these people were really so mad and their stories were so totally different that we were kind of stuck—like things weren't coming together. The girl thought that the guy hit her—no the guy thought that the girl hit him, but it wasn't really a hit, it was a smack, so he turned around and smacked her. Ms. Hamilton [the adult mediator] was there, which was good because they weren't agreeing on anything. The girl just said she was so mad because the boy said something about her, but she wouldn't say what, but I think about her body, and the boy was just like, "Yeah, okay," and there was nothing else to really do. Afterwards it was just like, "You should not have hit her." She [Ms. Hamilton] was saying that guys should not hit girls—she was trying to make him think that guys shouldn't hit girls. That's kind of like her opinion—I don't think they should either, but I don't think girls should hit guys either, so it's her opinion, and her focusing on the guy hitting the girl wasn't right. She should try to keep it to herself and stay neutral . . . I think, I'm not sure. I think the mediation settled that difference that they had, but I'm not sure if it's going to help in the future, really. So you see why it's difficult.

What constitutes sexual harassment? How does one name a dispute—as *harassment*, as *assault*, as a *fight*, or as an example of *kids being kids*? When should mediators interject their opinions? Are students permitted to raise issues of sexuality and abuse? In the following examples, as in the previous one, students were at a loss for how to proceed with mediations that were certainly, as were most mediations, complex—entailing issues that were systemic, cultural, economic, and sexual. The disparity between the training and the reality of mediations reflected not so much the shortcomings of the training but the grand complexity of students' disputes. The examples also point to how conflict resolution is based on a behaviorist model that aims to change the student without examining the context of the disagreement—the issues of poverty, race, and sexuality that are so often evoked but not specifically addressed in mediations.

In one mediation, a fight between two ninth-grade African American boys was addressed. During the free-breakfast program at school, two students—Sam and John—from very poor families fought over a donut. John had tried to take Sam's donut, and Sam had come close to striking John. In the mediation, the students refused to not fight. They only relented when they were threatened by the adult mediators with Russell School—the city alternative school for students labeled *behavioral problems*. Mr. Brossard (a special education teacher) was one of the adult mediators in the room—the other was Ms. Hamilton. On this particular day, an available student mediator could not be found.

During the mediation, Mr. Brossard tried to persuade Sam to say that he could visualize a different way of acting—of imagining a nonviolent means of dealing with the donut conflict—but Sam would not make the attempt. Sam insisted that he could not have acted differently—that he had to fight. "If I could have acted differently, I would have," he said. "I was hungry." The fact that he was apparently hungry was not addressed further in the mediation. Sam insisted that he had to fight because John had "played" (teased and insulted) him. Mr. Brossard said, "You know the administration will send you to Russell if you continue this way." Sam looked up, became a bit agitated, but also tried to show no reaction—although he, similar to most students, obviously feared Russell School.

Ultimately, Mr. Brossard adopted behaviorist methods to achieve his goal: Conflict was defined as an individual matter—according to the student's locus of control—and punishment with Russell was threatened. He turned to Ms. Hamilton and asked her, "Where is Sam's locus of control?" Ms. Hamilton said, "He has external motivation. His locus of control is external. He won't be played, that's all he knows, and he'll go down if he has to." She asked Sam, “Is it worth it to you, first to go to Russell, then probably Homebound [a program that restricts the student to his/her house], then . . . what, jail?” Sam did not respond. Ms. Hamilton asked both the boys, “Do you feel like the issue is squashed [over] between you two?” John said, “Yes.” Sam said, “No. If he’s smart it won’t. If he plays me, I’ll fight.” Ms. Hamilton asked Sam, “How are you going to respond if he’s playing you?” Sam said, “We are going to get into a fight.” So she told Sam, “You are going to end up in Russell.” Suddenly, Sam sat up a bit and said, “I can sit down and ignore it.” Ultimately, however, the boys would not agree to not fight. At the end of the mediation they would not shake hands. Just before Sam walked out of the office he said to nobody in particular, “I gotta eat, you know,” to which Mr. Brossard responded, “You got to change your attitude, that’s what you have to do.” Whereas the mediators saw the issue as a matter of mismanaged behavior, Sam understood it as a matter of defending his only meal. Several months later, Sam was placed in the alternative afternoon school program, which was for students such as Sam a stepping-stone for Russell School.

In another instance, an African American boy and White boy went to mediation. They had fought the year before and one had broken the other’s collarbone. In the mediation, it came out that Mike, the White boy, did not like Dan, the African American boy, “looking at” Mike’s 7-year-old sister who he walked home each day after school. Also, Mike complained that Dan called him insulting names. Dan turned to Mike and said that he was not the only person looking at his sister and calling him names. He explained, “I’m with a group of 18 to 20 people. I’m not the only one calling you bitch.” The student mediator wanted to know, “can you change your behavior in any way,” ignoring for the moment the fact that *bitch* (a way of calling somebody homosexual) was used and that Dan was a member of a gang that has been tormenting Mike and his friends. Suddenly, an announcement came over the PA system, interrupting the mediation, and the two boys took the opportunity to dart out of the room in opposite directions before signing the agreement not to fight again.

Other disputes that entailed complexities of poverty, race, and sexuality included disputes between two African American girls over a boy. The boy was the boyfriend of one of the girls and the lover of the other. The student mediator in an interview after the mediation thought it was "funny" that two girls fought over a boy and said that he wanted to get the girls to recognize how "stupid" it was. There was no understanding on the part of the White mediator of the difficulties for African American women in poor cities to maintain relationships with young Black men. In another case, a Black girl who had gone to mediation explained that she and a White girl had fought in gym class. According to the African American girl, the two did not get along because the White girl looked "down on" her because she was Black. In another case, a fight in gym class was started when a White girl accidentally spilled water on a Black girl and the African American girl yelled at the White girl, "I hate White bitches!" In all of these disputes, and in others, issues involving sexuality, race, gangs, and racist and homophobic name-calling were raised but not explicitly addressed in the mediations.

In general, the training for the peer mediation program defined conflict according to personal and individual differences—differences that could be overcome through techniques of reflective listening and behavior modification that would create understandings between people. In mediations, mediators urged disputants to visualize different manners of acting in an effort to change their behaviors. A behaviorist model of conflict combined with a philosophy of democratic humanism—based on unity, the importance of seeing from another's viewpoint, and respect—undergirded the training and had a lasting effect on student mediators and the philosophy of the program. Unfortunately, most disputes entailed more serious issues than individual or personal differences and misunderstandings. Throughout the year, 44 students went through mediation more than once. Why these persistent problems? During one day, I sat through two mediations involving the same person with a different disputant each time. One student, whose father had died during the year, had gone to mediation eight times. In all these mediations, issues of conflict that arose due to discrimination, hostilities associated with sexuality and gender, depression, self-hatred, boredom, and problems associated with poverty were left unspoken.

MAKING PROFESSIONAL USE OF PEER MEDIATION

> I think mediation is particularly good for the kids who are mediators because it puts them in a practice mode of carrying out the things they've learned where there's a lot of secondary learning going on that they can apply to their own life. (Brandon High psychologist)

In spite of the disparity between what mediators learn and what they face in mediation sessions, the mediation training is still valuable when attending to rather minor disagreements between students. The problem is those who have disputes do not ordinarily take part in the training. Those who get mediated do not learn the basic skills of conflict resolution or benefit from the resume-booster nature of the program. Being a mediator is highly valued in the school and no doubt to some extent by employees and college admission personnel—being mediated is not. In the earlier quotation, the school psychologist made evident the importance of the "secondary learning" (the learning that the mediators do) that takes place during the mediation process. The benefits that mediators gain from the program—from being trained, being certified, and conducting mediations—is in many ways the primary focus and purpose of the program. In the literature distributed by New Peace, often there was vague language used when describing who actually benefited from peer mediation programs. What is said in the following passage taken from their handbook could apply to either the mediators or the mediated:

> The developers of the mediation program met to explore strategies for improving students' problem solving skills and decrease the number of physical altercations in the school. Traditional interventions to reduce student conflict place the primary responsibility for conflict resolution on adults in authority in schools. A missing critical element is any possibility that students might learn the procedures, skills and attitudes to resolve conflict for themselves. By making adults the primary agents for conflict reduction, students never gain a sense of responsibility or accomplishment for any reduction of conflict in their school. Key elements of student empowerment to reduce peer conflict are students being given the

> means to and responsibility for resolving peer conflict. (New Peace, 1997, p. 2)

In an article, Georgianna (1996), the district coordinator of the peer mediation program, explained the benefits of the citywide program. Although he noted figures collected by the school demonstrating the overall success of the program in resolving conflicts, much of the focus was on the mediators themselves. He wrote,

> The role of the student mediator is one of tremendous personal responsibility. It provides a unique learning environment for the student mediator as well as the disputants while providing direct services to the school community. Several student mediators have commented on the impact that mediation sessions have had upon their perceptions of the world. This learning situation allows students to function in adult roles, learn excellent skills, and contribute significantly to their whole school environment while under the supervision of caring and concerned mentors. The student mediators learn the benefits of volunteering and providing a service that encourages their peers to problem solve constructively. In addition, each trained mediator learns the power of effective listening and the important role this serves in relating to and resolving problems with others. (p. 5)

He also noted that student mediators learn to arrange their schedules appropriately, to be available for mediation, and to be spokespeople for presenting their accomplishments and the program to other schools, parent associations, and the local university. The mediation program does benefit some students, unfortunately not always the right ones. It benefits those who already have many of the skills taught in the program. The reason a training session for new mediators can be only 22 hours long is that the students who do volunteer already possess, to some extent, the basic conflict resolution skills needed to conduct a mediation. These are students who do not ordinarily worry about violence in the school. In interviews, student mediators expressed their bewilderment regarding school fights; they in fact never fought. Most mentioned as a benefit of the program their own development and the skills that they gained that could be used in their own lives with their families and friends. One student noted,

> I think [the mediation training] taught me a lot about not only mediation, but things about myself and how other people react to each other and behave. I thought it was really neat to learn all that stuff because there were some things that I really didn't know, but now I can relate to other people. And my friendships are better now because I can talk to people and help them through their problems. I learned how not to offend people with things I say and with my body language. . . . It will sort of help me out relationship-wise with friends. I know how to talk with people now and not to get into business that I'm not supposed to be getting into.

Another student explained as well that the training foremost would help him in his own life. When asked about the training in general, he responded,

> About the training? It made me think a lot about arguing with my mother and my brother. It made me stop and think, maybe think of how I'll word something and how to be a lot more neutral instead of pointing fingers. I haven't gotten into a mediation. I hope that when it comes I'll be prepared. It's really helpful. I haven't even really talked to anybody that's been to mediation because lots of us, most of my friends think fighting people is not worth it.

Similar to most of the clubs and extracurricular activities in school, the peer mediation program was developed as a privileged and honored school activity. It was a privilege to be on the team; likewise, privileged students participated in the program. Peer mediation, then, although a successful program in addressing some conflicts in school, is also one of the many clubs available to students with aspirations for college and professional occupations. Students made no secret of this fact. Even on the first day of training when new trainees introduced themselves, several mentioned that they had joined the mediation team partly because it looked good on their resumes. Ultimately, discussions of the benefits of the mediation program by students and adult coordinators were multilayered, describing sometimes simultaneously the benefits for disputants, the benefits for student mediators, and the program's attachment to school clubs. One student, when asked why he decided to become a mediator, responded,

> Because I was already in Peer Leadership [another extracurricular activity] and I really liked it. I was even thinking about being a teacher. At the beginning of my freshman year they had an orientation and a list of all the clubs. I really wanted to do the mediation program and was looking forward to it because it can really help me in the future.

Whether a student becomes a peer mediator because of a concern for school conflicts or because of the program's benefits for himself or herself depends on the student, but most rightly noted the benefits it would provide them. Meanwhile, students also noted their concern for conflict in the school, and the adult coordinators hoped and worked to make the program effective in reducing conflicts. But all participants involved, especially the students, viewed the mediation program as they would most extracurricular activities in the school—as an activity that could provide them unique and valued experiences that would help them professionally.

That poor White and African American students did not generally participate in the program as mediators does not necessarily mean that they did not want to or that the school did not want them to join. Rather, it reflected a schoolwide problem: From the cafeteria to the tracked classes, almost everything in the school was divided along socioeconomic and racial lines. Whereas there exists much literature that insists that mediation teams must include diverse groups of students, often White students from professional and secure families are those most willing to volunteer for the time-consuming program. At Brandon High, high-achieving students from professional backgrounds possessed high degrees of social and cultural capital that they used to work the school system to their benefit by joining the appropriate clubs—the National Honor Society, the Yearbook Club, and the Peer Mediation Program—whereas many poor White and African American students did not.

Although there were some poor Black and White students with ambitions for college at Brandon High, there were many without, and of those who did have such ambitions, many did not work—and know how to work—the school system the way those from middle-class and professional backgrounds did. For the African American students, joining the peer mediation team was viewed, as one Black student explained, “as sissy.” Later, she referred to it as “being White, you know, oreo.” I had gotten to know one student during the year who had mentioned in passing that she had thought about joining peer mediation but had never done so. When I asked her why she had not joined, she said, “You know how it is. All these White people sitting around. There ain’t no space for me in there. They’re kind of like the goody-goody kids, cheerleaders and all that.” Researchers such as Fordham (1996) were right to recognize how Black students sometimes avoid White-dominated clubs and teams in fear of being perceived by their peers as acting White. But also, the mediation team, and perhaps other kinds of student clubs and organizations, did not appeal to students who were poor and outside the mainstream culture of the school. The focus on individual difference that undergirded the peer mediation program could not possibly engage youth whose complex conflicts existed all around them—in their neighborhoods and families, in their status in the school, and in their relations with adults, friends, and the opposite sex.

BENEFITING FROM PEER MEDIATION

There are aspects of peer mediation that may help schools reduce rates of violence. Misunderstandings are a natural part of the school day, and there are times when a neutral, skilled, and caring mediator may help disputants resolve a misunderstanding. This can be done when students are skilled in mediation and disagreements revolve around simple problems that can be solved with behavioral interventions. As one principal noted in an article, “student [mediators] must be taught a concrete and specific procedure for negotiating integrative agreements that result in all disputants achieving their goals while maintaining or even improving the quality of the relationship” (Heller, 1996, p. 15). But what happens, as so often occurred in the mediations I observed, is that the goals of the disputants are nonexistent or completely vague and convoluted even to the disputants themselves. Having disputants state their goals—“what they want to get out of the mediation”—assumes that students have discrete goals, the blocking of which causes conflict. Students do not fight only because of goals that are not achieved; they fight because of circumstances. And when there is a goal, perhaps it is not one adults would want students to achieve. What if a student's goal is to beat down another to show his friends that he is tough, or to oppress women, or to retaliate against someone in another gang? What if the school violence is a result of domestic abuse or alienating and inequitable school structures? The fight over the donut in the cafeteria between John and Sam was not about donuts; it was about being poor, having low social standing in a large school, and being in ninth grade—a grade with a high drop-out rate. It was about these issues and others we may never know about.

To deal with the types of conflicts that arose in Brandon High, understandings about conflict—and how conflict is taught in training sessions—needs to account for the types of issues that arise when one considers the patterns that develop around peer mediation: Specifically, that so many girls, people of color, and poorer students went to mediation and that the mediation program, similar to most extracurricular activities, was generally participated in by the most active and high-achieving students. Peer mediation programs must prepare students to address conflicts that arise due to systemic and cultural violence associated with deep prejudices and injustices in our society, and this can only be done by talking critically about issues of race, sexuality, poverty, gender, city politics, and school structures (even in reference to peer mediation programs)—topics that are too often silenced in school because of their controversial natures.

Not engaging with the realities of, for example, homophobia brings with it problems that make the peer mediation program in many instances ineffective. For example, the focus on remaining neutral and "taking the sting out of words" must be reconsidered. Although it is important that student and adult mediators remain consistent with all people, that they be understanding and open-minded, they must also name injustices and teach students the difference between, for example, sexual harassment and flirting. Neutrality is besides the point; language should be at the center of the process. To do this, however, mediators must look beyond the immediate disputes and discuss the issues that create violent circumstances, including those having to do with poverty, social isolation, prejudice, and inequity. Mediators must be prepared to talk about the possibilities of harassment, power, control, and bullying when conflicts occur between people of different social status in the school. They must understand, as Anderson (1997) noted, that many urban youth are in such great need of respect that they will be violent if that is what it takes to obtain it. They must understand how the roots of school violence can be found in what Short (1997) identified as the "organizations, social systems, school structures, and cultures that produce different rates of violent behavior" (p. 39)—and not just in people's mismanaged behavior.

It is impossible to say that a mediation session is not the time to deal with complex issues regarding sexuality, class, gangs, and race because it is during mediations that these issues most often arise. Unfortunately, in mediations, conflict is constructed in particularly psychological terms of individual difference, and hence, behaviorist models of conflict resolution are recommended and followed. Instead, training of students and adults must make central to the program the belief that conflict is sometimes best addressed through advocacy, by taking seriously people's words and stories and helping them through a conflict, not as neutral mediators but as advocates and mentors. Words must be tended to, especially when they may be deeply insulting. For example, calling a student who is in the special education program an *idiot*—as happened one time—is more than just a "sting." In general, by example and by lead, the trainers of the peer mediation team referred to prejudice and harassment but did not seriously examine the topics. In interviews, students too reiterated that names were not an issue. In short, then, although well prepared for "small, resolvable problems," student mediators were not prepared for the more complex conflicts that often came to the mediation table.

Of course, part of the problem is the mediation program itself. It too is part of the school structure that privileges some students and labels others. It is has been noted that peer mediation programs must attract diverse groups of students and that a lack of students' voices may contribute to the development of violence prevention programs that are “based on a an incomplete picture or understanding of children’s conflicts” (Hale et al., 1996, p. 269; Heller, 1996). But to create a truly diverse mediation team, mediation programs must lead the way in making available an extracurricular activity that students from all walks of life can be successful in. It cannot just fall in line with other activities and tracking systems in schools that have the effect of rewarding some at the expense of others. Certainly, mediation programs should be respected and those who conduct mediations—who go through the training and maintain the program through their energies and work—should be rewarded; but programs cannot reserve rewards for those who sometimes need them the least.

The stature of the mediation program in the school was seen in multiple ways—in awards, T-shirts, and certificates—but was perhaps best expressed by a counselor who one morning told me that an ex-Brandon High student had been shot and killed during the night. In her story, issues of urban conflict and mediation status arose simultaneously. As was customary, the school police officer, who had a direct line to the city police department, found out about the tragedy before it was reported in the city newspaper. When I asked the counselor about the student, she told me that he was “Black, a good kid, and part of the mediation team back then.” Being part of the mediation team seemed to validate his importance; it let me know who he was as a kid involved in school, a kid with aspirations and promise. She took me to the trophy case and pointed him out in the picture of the students standing on the capitol’s steps in Albany. He was one of three Black students in the photograph and the only Black male.

Remembered as a mediator, the multiple tragedies that led to the student’s death were the life circumstances of many poor city students. Not only do mediation programs need their voices, but these students need to know how to make use of what the school offers so that they too can reap the benefits that such programs can bring. In some cases, the benefits may be lifesaving; in the case of this one student, it was not. Perhaps no mediation program can change the course of such events; some say this is expecting too much from a school-based program. But a mediation program should, at the very least, create true diversity by challenging school structures that segregate and address even life-shattering urban conflicts in their training and mediation sessions. This will benefit both the students and the mediation program. The students will acquire the resume-booster benefits of the program and—if the program were to be inclusive of significant urban and social problems—may learn something important about conflict and their own lives. The peer mediation program would benefit as well; it would have the perspectives and energies of students whose lives are often full of the complicated issues that the program should aim to address. Whereas some would feel that peer mediation programs should only focus their attention on rather minor disputes in the school, which can nevertheless escalate, this underestimates the possibilities of the program and misjudges the capabilities of young people—shortchanging a valued and ultimately effective form of conflict resolution.

NOTE

1. All names of individuals and of localities have been changed.

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