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# Effect of conflict resolution and peer mediation training on empathy skills

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**Abstract**

The research is an experimental study that depends on Pre-test/ Post-test Model with Control Group. Conflict resolution and peer mediation training program was applied to the experimental group throughout 10 weeks. According to the result of the statistical analysis it is observed that there is a meaningful increase in the level of empathic skills of students who are trained in the experimental group. In the light of the findings researchers suggests that conflict resolution and peer mediation training should be incorporated in the curriculum of Psychological Counseling and Guidance department.
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*Keywords:* Conflict resolution; peer mediation; empathic skill; psychological counseling and guidance

## 1. Introduction

There are many definitions of empathy in literature. According to Hackney (1978), in literature there were 21 definitions of empathy in 1968 (Clark, 2004). So, this gives us clues about difficulties in definitions of empathy. Among many definitions of empathy, the one suggested by Rogers (1983) is the most commonly used one. Rogers defines empathy as "understanding emotions and thoughts of person who is next to you accurately, feeling what he feels and process of passing this to him". Rogers's definition of empathy emphasized the accurate perception of the emotional components and meanings of an individual's internal frame of reference (Clark, 2004).

Rogers states that the basic conditions of therapeutic relationship entail empathy, respect and transparency. A number of studies have shown that it is possible to increase levels of empathy through training programs. Rogers (1980) argued that empathic skills are developed with experience and that a trainee learns these skills under the influence of close relationships with supervisors. Wells (1975) found that systematic facilitative training is effective in raising the level of accurate empathy. Dökmen (1988) found in his research that empathy skill level of students who attend psychodrama group increased. Yıldırım (1992) found empathy skill level of senior students of Psychological Counseling and Guidance and Psychology to be higher than first year students' empathy skill level. Various other studies supporting the perspective that believes the acquisition of empathy through education exist in

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literature (Mete, 2007; Akyol & Çiftçibaşı, 2005; Alver, 2005; Şahin & et al. 2005; Barak, 1990; Black & Phillips, 1982).

Empathy has indispensable peculiarity in therapeutic environment. But the importance of empathy is not restricted to this. As Genç & Kalafat (2008) stated, empathy also has peculiarities that develop social aspects of individual. Empathy is an essential component of motivation to perform pro-social behaviors (Einlof, 2008; Stephan & Finley, 1999). Fesbach (1989) found that empathy training reduces aggression and increases pro-social behavior (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Similarly Bandura (1999) stated that empathy is considered an effective control of aggression both childhood and adolescence. Rehber (2007) determined that there is a negative relationship between basic structures of aggression and empathy. Moreover empathy was found to be significantly related both problem solving (Rehber, 2007) and conflict engagement (Wied, Branje & Meeus, 2007).

Increasing problems of schools nowadays necessitates giving training about conflict resolution and peer mediation. Many educators have come to believe that students' academic experience should include training on managing interpersonal conflicts constructively (Johnson and et al. 1995). Conflict is disagreement of needs, motivation, wishes, and demands (Schrumpf, et al. 1997). According to this definition, it is possible to say that conflict is existent in wherever human exists. Each of us gives various reactions against conflicts, for example, such as abstaining, ignoring, physical aggression and fighting. The most important thing in here is to cope with conflict and reach constructive solution ways. For these reasons, conflict resolution gains importance. One of the effective ways of conflict resolution is peer mediation.

Peer mediation is a method of conflict resolution in which a third party helps disputants to resolve a conflict through communication (Bell et al. 2000). Training mediator students at the schools by conflict resolution and peer mediation training program is important in terms of spreading peace and democracy in the society because being trained a mediator means that there are people who open the ways of communication (Taştan, 2006). While solving conflicts disputants should communicate with each other. Therefore, communication skills have huge place in conflict resolution and peer mediation training. In the extent of this research, also empathic skills are emphasized in addition to communication skills because empathy takes part in among conflict resolution skills. The main idea here is that understanding emotions and thoughts of a person during a conflict can prevent its destructive consequences.

In order to carry on our relationships in a daily life, we need some skills such as effective communication skills, ability to manage interpersonal conflict. It is important for healthy societies beginning to bring these skills to children. Therefore, it is thought that teachers and school counselors should be informed about these subjects.

As regards mediation and conflict resolution there are especially researches that are conducted with children and teenagers are seen in literature (Stevahn, L., Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R., & Schultz, R., 2002; Bikmore, K., 2002; Stevahn, L., 2004; Fawcett, L.M., & Garton, A., 2005). Unlike previous research this study covers candidate school counselors who will have effect on training next generations. For the study, candidate school counselors are subjected to conflict resolution and peer mediation training. At the same time, the influence of training on empathy skills of school counselors has been analyzed.

The research question of the study can be expressed like that: "Is there any effect of conflict resolution and peer mediation training on the level of empathic skill in senior students of Psychological Counseling and Guidance?" Considering the aim of the study this research tries to answers to the following sub-questions

1. Before conflict resolution and peer mediation training there is no meaningful differentiation between experimental group and control group according to scores of the pre-test.
2. After conflict resolution and peer mediation training there is meaningful differentiation between experimental group and control group according to scores of the post-test.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

In this research pre-test/post-test control group design was used among experimental designs. Working group consists of volunteer students that are selected with random method among senior students majoring in Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department. In order to constitute working group, a brief presentation

meeting was held at the beginning of the academic year about conflict resolution and peer mediation. After determining volunteer students who want to take part in the research, sessions started with total 26 students 13 of them are in control group and 13 of them are in experiment group. Experimental group consists of 2 male and 11 female, total 13 students and control group consists of 2 male and 11 female, total 13 students.

Empathy Skill Scale (B form) that was developed by Dökmen (1988) was used in the research. Form was applied to 60 subjects by two weeks period for reliability of the scale, and when the relationship between this two measurement is calculated by Pearson's product-moment coefficient, it is determined that relationship is at the level of r=.83 (p<.001). In validity study form was applied to a group of psychologists and university students. Between two groups meaningful differentiation was found in favor of psychologists (t=8.15, sd=46, p<.001).

The empathic skill scale was applied to both experimental and control group. Then, Conflict resolution and peer mediation training program was applied to the experimental group throughout 10 weeks, 90 minutes one day per week. Each session was approximately 90 minutes. No procedure was applied to control group. After 10 weeks long training, empathic skill scale was applied again to both groups.

In analysis of data, convenience of data to the normal distributions is determined by Kolmogorov-Simirnov one sampling test and its difference between groups is analyzed by using "Mann-Whitney U" test that is one of the non-parametric tests. Importance level was taken as 0,05.

## 3. Findings and Result

In this study convenience of data to the normal distributions is determined by Kolmogorov-Simirnov one sampling (Kolmogrov Smirnov Empathy $_{pre-test}$ =0,214 S.d.=26 p=0,003 p<0,05; Kolmogrov Smirnov Empathy $_{post-test}$ =0,201 S.d.=26 p=0,008 p<0). Since working data did not show normal distribution, differentiation between groups were calculated by "Mann-Whitney U" test among non-parametric tests.

Experiment and control groups' pre-test score analysis of Empathic Skill Scale and results of "Mann-Whitney U" are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre-test scores of experiment and control group

| Group | N | X | ss | S.h. | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Experiment* | 13 | 182,692 | 16,740 | 4,642 | 147,00 | 208,00 |
| *Control* | 13 | 189,076 | 11,849 | 3,286 | 164,00 | 200,00 |
| Total | 26 | 185,884 | 14,577 | 2,858 | 147,00 | 208,00 |

As it is understood from Table 1, score mean of the experiment group is $X_{experiment=}$182,692; score mean of the control group is $X_{control}$=189,076 and means are in favor of students of control group. In order to test whether score difference between experiment group and control group is important, firstly empathic skill scores are tested by Kolmogorov Smirnov normal spread test. As a result of analysis it is understood that pre-test empathic skill scores are not spread normally (Kolmogorov Smirnov=0,214 S.d.=26 p=0,003 p<0,05). For this reason, Mann Whitney U test was applied in order to determine difference between groups. According to this test result it is determined that control group had higher empathic skill level than experiment group, but they do not present meaningful differentiation statistically (Mann Whitney U= 64,500 Z= -1,029 p>0,05). This situation shows that before experiment empathic skill level of experiment and control group was equivalent each other.

Experiment and control groups' post-test score analysis of Empathic Skill Scale and results of "Mann-Whitney U" are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of post-test scores of experiment and control group

| Group | N | X | ss | S.h. | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Experiment* | 13 | 196,846 | 14,407 | 3,164 | 171,00 | 206,00 |
| *Control* | 13 | 186,538 | 14,133 | 3,920 | 152,00 | 203,00 |
| Total | 26 | 191,692 | 13,637 | 2,674 | 152,00 | 206,00 |

As it is understood from Table 2, score mean of the experiment group is $X_{experiment=}$196,846; score mean of the control group is $X_{control}$=186,538. Post-test empathic skill scores were tested by Kolmogorov Smirnov normal spread

test and it is concluded that post-test empathic skill scores did not present normal spread (Kolmogorov Smirnov=0,201 S.d.=26 p=0,008 p>0,05). According to Mann Whitney U test results, it was determined that empathic skills of experiment and control group differed meaningfully as statistical (Mann Whitney U= 41,500 Z= -2,209 p<0,05). Students of experiment group who get conflict and peer mediation training profited much more when empathic skill levels were compared.

Table 3. Mann Whitney U test results of difference between experiment and control group according to pre-test/post-test score means

|  | Pre-test | Post-test |
|---|---|---|
| Mann-Whitney U | 64,500 | 41,500 |
| *Wilcoxon W* | 155,500 | 132,500 |
| *Z* | -1,029 | -2,209 |
| *P* | 0,311 | 0,026 |
| Importance | p>0,05 | **p<0,05*** |

As it is seen Table 3, it is determined that there is statistically meaningful difference among post-test results in favor of experiment group while there is no difference can be seen among pre-test results of both experiment and control groups.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main aim of this research is to examine effect of conflict resolution and peer mediation training on level of empathic skills of senior students in Psychological Counseling and Guidance department. For this reason, scores which were provided from "Empathic Skills Scale" that was applied as a pre-test/post-test to experiment and control groups were compared. According to the findings that were provided from results of post-test that was applied after conflict resolution and peer mediation training, it was determined that there is a meaningful differentiation in favor of experiment group among post-test scores of experiment and control group. When experiment and control groups are compared at the end of the conflict resolution and peer mediation training that was applied in this study, it is seen that scores that students in experiment group got from "Empathic Skills Scale" increased meaningfully. At the end of the conflict resolution and peer mediation training students' level of empathic skills increased in addition to gaining experience.

Thus, it is a desired goal to train future psychological counselors having empathic skills at high level, as the results of this study confirm. Empathy is not beneficial to whomever the empathy is felt towards. It is important for person who sets empathy (Dökmen, 2002). As Golden and Doyle (1991) mentioned counselors whose empathy level is high are evaluated as having high level of empathic skills by their clients (Kapıkıran & Kapıkıran, 2000). And this makes double sided effect. People reciprocally feel that they are understood and minded. And this, as mentioned by Keefe (1978) means that empathy is a facilitator of growth.

Empathic skills of candidate school counselors should be developed by various trainings. According to the findings of this research, conflict resolution and peer mediation training acted in development of empathic skill. This result exhibits similarities with other studies in the field. Fisher (1994) states as increase in the empathy level of participants during his workshop that was conducted with Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Schaeffer and Rollin (2001) found in their conflict resolution program that empathy level increased. In their research Karahan and Sardoğan (2006) found that teaching interpersonal relations and conflict resolution skills affects conflict resolutions and empathic skills of candidate teachers. According to this it is seen possible to say that empathy skills can be developed with conflict resolution and peer mediation in addition to various trainings. It is thought that role plays that took place almost all sessions were effective on this result.

Individuals who have empathic skills are successful in understanding reasons for others' behaviors as much as understanding their own behaviors (Findlay et al. 2006). This is a desirable situation for conflict resolution to be constructive. As Öner (2002) mentioned, all personnel should be helped to gain conflict resolution skill for effective school environment. Thus, conflicts in school can be solved constructively and increase of empathic skills of individuals can be provided.

Considering the findings of the research, the following suggestions can be given: conflict resolution and peer mediation training should be incorporated in the curriculum of Psychological Counseling and Guidance department. With various training programs that are prepared for different age groups training can be given to adults, children,

and other groups. Therefore, training programs can be prepared under different titles in order to generalize these studies. In this research no procedure was applied on control group while procedure was applied on experimental group. If we apply some other activities on the control group scores can be compared with the results of the study. The effectiveness of the program can be confirmed by observing the experimental group for a period of time. This study was conducted to a small sampling of students. It can be suggested that the study can be done over a bigger sampling group in other departments in order to generalize data to bigger samplings.

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