
Peer Mediation: A Qualitative Study of Youthful Frames of Power and Influence

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Focused interviews were completed on fifty elementary school children involved in peer mediation at two midwestern public schools and one Quaker school. This qualitative study investigated the children's perceptions of conflict, violence, pathways to peer mediation, the efficacy of mediation, the role of mediators, and their core values. Two actual mediations were observed. Goffman's Frame Analysis was used to explain the process by which the children placed their unique stamp on what appeared to be an adult model of conflict resolution.

In response to the overwhelming problem of American youth violence (Schrumpf, Crawford, and Usadel, 1991; Sexton, 1994a, 1994b; Terry, 1994; Maguire and Pastore, 1994; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993), more than five thousand schools have formally instituted peer mediation programs. According to the National Association for Mediation in Education, the main goals of peer mediation programs in the schools are "to teach students how to deal with anger constructively, how to communicate feelings and concerns without using violence and abusive language, how to think critically about alternative solutions, and how to agree to solutions in which all parties win" (Kort, 1990, p. 26). Varying slightly from one school to the next, the program generally involves training children to negotiate peaceful settlements of conflicts that arise in the school setting.

Critiques of the peer mediation model (Bettmann and Moore, 1994) have defined the program as skirting the root causes of youth violence—for example, the lack of positive adult role models, the absence of supervised recreational facilities, the failure of schools to maintain a safe learning environment, the ghetto ethos of having to save face, the reinforcement of inequity through conflict resolution, and the absence of systematic sociological and qualitative studies of the worldviews of peer mediators. Other applied quantitative studies

have found that peer mediation is highly effective in resolving and preventing conflict in schools (Gest and Guttman, 1994; Crary, 1992; Orpinas and others, 1996). The mass media have popularized mediation as well. One article in the *New York Times* praised as successful a peer mediation program in the New Haven, Connecticut, public schools ("Easing Violence, with Students' Help," 1993).

However great the interest in the subject, much of the existing research on peer mediation has been quantitative and evaluative. This is troubling because research on peer mediation is at the beginning stage, in which qualitative research would be more appropriate in exploring the dimensions of the program and for raising questions for future research. The purpose of the study discussed in this article is to address this need.

The Research Problem

Our study explored peer mediation from the perspectives of elementary school children involved in the program. We probed the thinking and experiences of fifty fifth- and sixth-grade children involved in mediation at three midwestern elementary schools. Did the children put their own spin on peer mediation, or did they accept the adult concepts and meanings designed into the program? What were the pathways that the children took to peer mediation, and what impact did mediation have on their lives? Did the peer mediators perceive any social or physical risk associated with their involvement in the program? What did the peer mediators think they had learned from the program? How did they conceptualize violence and conflict? What ethos and values were brought to the program by the youthful mediators? These questions informed the research.

The Theoretical Framework

Peer mediation is defined by Moore (1986, p. 8) as "the intervention into a dispute or negotiation by an acceptable, impartial and neutral third party who has no authoritative decision-making power, to assist disputing parties in voluntarily reaching their own mutually acceptable settlement of issues in dispute."

The developers of school mediation conceptualized conflict as a necessary and even positive outcome of people pursuing genetically determined psychological needs (Schrumpf, Crawford, and Usadel, 1991). However, at least seventeen demonstration mediation projects in Ohio (Kaufman, 1991) and the three projects we studied formally defined conflict as learned, dysfunctional, and in need of being resolved, if not eradicated. The National Association for Mediation in Education put together a simple and clearly described method for coordinating a peer mediation program. Contextual factors, however, such as the level of crime in the neighborhood; media distortions of criminality; administrator, parent, and teacher support; and other structures have led to wide diversity among mediation programs. Given such disparity in the adult-

generated model of peer mediation, we anticipated that the children's perceptions, too, would reflect their own peculiar twists. With the prospect of multiple realities rather than a tidy unidimensional model, we used Goffman's Frame Analysis (1974) to help gather and interpret data from the field.

For peer mediation to work, children must be able to communicate across class, race, and gender interests. To transcend these differences, mediators must create what Burke (1989, p. 77) called "margins of overlap." One might find these margins in conversations with mediators about their views of mediation or their conceptions of conflict. The researcher looks for symbols or concepts that might be universally shared, that is, constructed in similar ways, by the youths involved.

Frame Analysis provides a conceptual basis for understanding the process of constructing these shared realities. A frame, like the wood or metal border on a picture, clarifies and defines the subject contained within the boundary. Different frames change the picture such that new and different "realities" emerge from what is virtually the same picture.

Frames are social tools that allow individuals to label and explain social action, that give actors control, and that socialize the "bystanders" into the value system of the key actors. Frames create meaningful and predictable realities, which lend stability and order to given situations. They convey that order and the underlying values to all who observe the action. Goffman viewed frames as useful fictions that not only describe the rules of the game but also shed light on goals and values that guide individuals. For example, school children might put their stamp on peer mediation as a means of claiming some semblance of control from the adults who otherwise dominate their world. Youthful frames of mediation should provide children with the rules for engaging in mediation. In a compelling way, the frames can define what peer mediation can do and why one would want to do it. In this sense, frames of peer mediation function to motivate, support, and socialize children into the conflict resolution ideology. Taken as a whole, frames of mediation are part of the school environment.

To summarize, peer mediators are trained by adults to mediate conflicts within the rules and regulations of the program. That is the official picture. However, peer mediators frame this adult view in ways that preserve the picture yet make it their own. On a pragmatic level, youthful frames might make it possible for children of all different stripes and abilities to "take the role of the other" and thereby communicate effectively with one another. These youthful frames of peer mediation are the foci of our analysis.

The Study

Three very different elementary schools were chosen as sites at which to conduct observations and focused interviews. The school we call Elysian Fields (EF) was located in a large midwestern city. EF had 350 students, roughly one-half

of whom were bused from a low-income, high-crime area. The second school, Midtown (M), was located in an affluent area of a relatively small midwestern city, had 745 students, and had no class-linked busing program. The Quaker school (Q) was in a large midwestern city, had 39 students, and had no busing either. All three schools had grades K–6. The students observed and interviewed were fifth and sixth graders.

EF had 38 peer mediators, 20 of whom were male, 18 African American, and 20 white. The program was in its sixth year at the time of the field work. M, in its fourth year of the program, had 120 mediators, roughly half female, but only 13 percent of the mediators were African American. Q did not have a peer mediation program as such but had integrated mediation into the core curriculum. In a sense, every student at Q was trained as a peer mediator. Thus, EF and M had roughly 10 percent and 16 percent, respectively, of their students trained as peer mediators. Both programs used two all-school assemblies per year to present the peer mediation program to the entire student body. No mediators were involved in the planning and content of these efforts, although the two public school principals frequently used the term *student empowerment* in describing the mediation program.

Focused interviews were completed with fifty peer mediators, thirteen students who had been mediated as a result of some conflict they had had with other students, and six administrators-teachers. One actual mediation was observed at EF, and one of the daily lessons in mediation at Q was observed in a third-grade classroom. The foci covered in the interviews included:

- Pathways to peer mediation
- Status groups
- Changes in status groups due to participation in peer mediation
- Teacher perceptions expressed by the mediators
- Carryover of peer mediation to family and neighborhood conflicts
- Ethical problems
- Personal philosophy of life
- Perceived standards for judging cases
- Conceptions of violence and conflict
- Perceived effectiveness of peer mediation
- Demographic characteristics of mediators' families
- Ethnic-racial knowledge

For the purposes of this study, we concentrated on pathways, views on mediators and mediation, conceptions of conflict and violence, and philosophies of life. Field notes were entered on the computer for analysis using HyperQual 2.

Pathways to Peer Mediation. At EF, teachers recommended students to become peer mediators. The school counselor, the administrative head of the program, made the final selections. At M, students applied, usually at the urging of their teachers, and the principal chose the finalists.

Almost all of the mediators said they felt only support from teachers or parents on their way to becoming mediators. In the words of one girl at M, "My mom said it was OK and that it was a good thing to get into." When asked what she would have done if her mother had not said that, she said, "I would have done it anyway." Another girl at EF said, "My mom asked me to, but I had a choice."

Only one mediator described the decision to become a mediator and the actual selection as evoking status. The rest framed their pathways as ordinary events that called no special attention to themselves. Some even said they could not remember the details surrounding their selection. Others listed fairly mundane reasons for applying. A boy at EF said, "I got a note when I was in third grade. . . . My sister [is a mediator]. . . . She didn't tell me any specific information about it. I got a note from Mrs. G [the counselor] inviting me to become a mediator. We had a little test, looked at a picture, then went out in the hall, came back in, and told what you saw." He could not recall anything else about the three days of training, and when asked what his reasons were for joining, he replied, "I don't know. Now I like it because it's fun. I like doing the mediations. You get to talk with other people." A boy from EF said, "I just wanted to help people out and they just picked me out." Another boy at the same school responded, "I kinda wanted to get out of class. Also, because a bunch of my friends were in it." When asked what the other children thought of them when they decided to become mediators, one boy at EF said, "The kids made fun of me . . . called me a tattler." Another boy at the same school said, "Most of the time people don't know." The boy who was made fun of was not typical of the mediators interviewed.

This downplaying of their selection contrasts rather sharply with the frame of the adult coordinator of the peer mediation program at EF. She described a teaching staff in complete opposition to the program at its inception, because they feared losing control over discipline. She pointed out that the peer mediators kept strict confidence, so even the offender's teacher would not know that mediation had occurred or what the outcome was. In her view, the mediators won over the resistant teachers through successful conflict resolution and became "a very high-status group" in the eyes of the faculty. She believed that the mediators had internalized this high-status label. She followed up on this belief by giving the mediators special attention. In her words, "The kids see themselves as responsible people who are here to make the school run. We do make a fuss over them. We give them special awards when they graduate, and we host a nice meeting once a year where we give them awards, pizza, and candy."

Frames of Conflict and Violence. One adult who helped design the peer mediation concept told us in an interview that she distinguished between what she called "senseless violence" and "necessary conflict." In her words, conflict is defined as "interpersonal differences or tension between two or more people, possibly violence. The people value or need competition, and it must be a problem seen by individuals, group, or society. You can mediate the fallout from senseless violence, but you can't mediate senseless violence per se. Mediation

is not about the eradication of conflict. Conflict is necessary at times for change to occur. Nor should your goal be to eradicate physical violence per se. Sometimes you need it to defend yourself, to strike back." Clearly she viewed violence and conflict as a means of social change.

The principal of M defined violence as "a hurtful action where one feels threatened and unsafe." She minimized the mediators' ability to identify and work with violence-prone children. She felt that preconditions such as low socioeconomic status, alienation from the school, parental abuse, behavior disorders, and racism made violence too difficult for the mediators to conceptualize or mediate. In her words, "Mediators are not trained to deal with violence by students."

Only two mediators framed violence and conflict along the adult lines. Even so, they felt that mediators could handle violence through mediation. One girl at M felt that conflict and violence might be good if "it would help two people realize they need help." The other mediator, a boy at EF, defined conflict as "arguments when people get mad and start pushing or threatening, saying they are going to hit after school or go and get their big brother. . . . It's [conflict] useful when someone is in an argument, almost a fight, then pushed apart and go to mediation to get it solved." The rest of the mediators had varying definitions, but they all agreed that neither conflict nor violence were functional, and they all included violence in the purview of peer mediation.

Interestingly, the Quaker school mediators were unable to define conflict and violence. They believed, however, that "arguments" and "accidentally hurting someone's feelings" were negative and should be avoided. When asked what the word *conflict* meant, one mediator replied, "I have never even looked that word up in my dictionary." On the other hand, all of the Q students who were interviewed conceptualized *peace* similarly. Their responses included statements such as peace means "to love and care for your neighbors," "to have no war, no enemies, or fighting," and "peace is when nobody fights and it's really nice . . . quiet, kind of."

The youthful frames of violence were decidedly nonracial. Only one student, a girl from EF, defined violence along racial lines. She believed that African American gangs were the cause. Responding to a question about whether certain groups were more likely to engage in violence, she replied, "Yes. Some students talk about it like the Bloods and the Crips. It is really scary. They cuss a lot. It's mostly boys, a very small group. They talk about bringing guns to school and shooting the teachers' heads off." Another girl at EF identified students who received poor grades as likely candidates for violence. At M, where racial minority students were highly visible due to their relatively small numbers, we would not have been surprised if some of the mediators had scapegoated the minority groups for fighting and conflicts at the school, but this did not occur. One girl's comment summed it up. In her words, "It [mediation] isn't necessarily for bad people. It is for people who are arguing and fighting. All people do this."

The fact that the mediators appeared to have nonracial frames of violence and conflict surprised us, given the adult frames. Perhaps the diverse racial backgrounds of the mediators played a role, or possibly a self-selection process was at work. Then again, the experience of mediating conflict might have served to break down stereotypes.

Generally, mediators framed conflict and violence as points on a continuum or scale, from slightly inflammatory verbal exchanges to killing someone. Some mediators viewed the verbal dimension as conflict and the physical one as violence, whereas others did not make that distinction. Nearly all of the mediators felt that the media, particularly TV, were too violent. Most also believed that TV had a large impact on the thinking and behavior of children.

Views of Mediators and Mediation. To gain insight into the students' views on mediators and mediation, we analyzed official program documents, observed an actual peer mediation at EF, and interviewed students. The documents, as well as the adult administrators, often used the term *empowerment* to describe a predicted state of new power that the school children would experience as a consequence of mediation. The counselor and peer mediation founder at EF mentioned this by way of rationalizing her hands-off approach to the actual mediations. In her words, "If I were to interfere, I would take the power away. Once you give them the power, you can't take it back."

Although it was never stated explicitly either in the documents or in the administrators' comments, the implication was that being a mediator would bring not only power but also status. The significant administrative effort that went into supporting the mediation programs, including all-school assemblies twice a year and parties for the mediators, conveyed this status message. In addition, the administrators viewed mediation as a prevention and a solution to violence. The counselor at EF said, "Peer mediation is focused on preventing violent behavior and on the solution to conflict. It's getting at both ends. The two kids today (scheduled for the mediation we observed) are fighters. Two years ago they would not have waited even one day for mediation." It had been two days since their fight. "Now it's the smart thing to do. It's an out without losing face. It's OK to be tough but you also want to be smart. . . . It's a middle-class value to talk it out, but it's a survival skill now, where the alternative is to shoot it out. The other kid is new. He said, 'I like to be here because I don't have to fight.'"

In the mediation we observed, it took less than five minutes for the combatants to reach an agreement to stay away from each other, sign the contract, and leave. No formal disciplinary action was needed. In this case, the conflict appeared to be resolved—almost. As J placed his name on the contract and stood up to leave, he commented, "I didn't kick him the first time, and I promise I won't kick him again."

The mediators did not frame themselves as special people with status and power. In fact, they did not view themselves as members of a group at all but instead described mediators as a diverse collection of individuals. A girl at M

said, "I don't think you could say that they are all the same. They have different personalities. Some weren't nice to people. Some had been suspended from time to time. No, I don't think so [no special status]. People don't make a big deal about it. You wear a special penny in your shoe at recess." When asked if peer mediators were viewed as a status group, a boy at EF replied, "No, they are just like normal people." Another girl at EF commented, "There is no 'We're mediators. We have to stick together.'" Do other kids see you as special because you are a mediator? "No, they know we are mediators but they don't think of us as their heroes." Is there power in being a mediator? A boy mediator at EF said, "They have the power to tell you not to interrupt and stuff like that, but it's not like being a court judge." A boy at M added, "The mediators don't make decisions." One mediator at EF compared his position to that of a "kid police officer," but then he downplayed the issue of status, saying, "I just feel like my regular self."

This antistatus frame was most evident at Q. The principal described mediation as permeating the entire curriculum: "We place a high value on each individual life. Everyone is valued in God's eyes, each child. It is the respect for the individual that we stress. It's the freedom to explore who each child is as a person, either religiously or academically. It's the worth of an individual. The school is designed to show that worth, to let it come out."

Although the mediators framed themselves as ordinary folk, the students who had been mediated saw things a little differently. A girl at EF commented, "It was pretty weird having kids help you out of problems. Usually when you think of someone helping you out you think of an adult or someone older than you." Are peer mediators a group? "Kind of. All of them have to work together or else it won't work. If they don't work together, people would see that and say they can't even be friends together. . . . When you get chosen, you have to be a good role model, a good student, and be able not to blab to other students, to keep it to yourself." Another boy, who had been in a mediation due to a fight, viewed the mediators at EF as influential and effective agents of social control. He said, "I think they [mediators] are good for the kids. If the kids run in the school, they stop them from hurting themselves."

Only two children were critical of mediators for abusing power. One, a boy at EF who had been in a conflict and had gone through mediation, said, "They have power over us . . . [they] take sides." The other student, a girl who was a mediator at EF, said that she had observed one instance of a mediator helping a friend because "they can influence mediation."

Generally, the children thought that mediation effectively prevented violence as well as resolved conflicts. In the words of one girl at M, "It [mediation] can help to keep people from getting over-mad at people. Yes, it definitely prevents. In some cases, it solves violence." A few identified the reasons for this as mediation teaching social skills and making the students feel more integrated into the school. A girl at M mentioned the effect that she thought mediation had had on the students who had been through the program. She said,

“The program helps them grow. It helps them feel more important, less disobedient. They feel that they don’t have to get attention from the teacher by being bad.” The mediators defined the requisites for effective mediation as having objectivity (“mediators can’t take people’s sides”), taking the role of the other (“reversing roles”), having “listening skills,” and demonstrating “cooperation.”

A few of the mediators framed mediation as intellectually challenging, a concept not mentioned in the adult frames. From the program literature and from our interviews with the administrators, we learned that social survival skills and feeling that one is part of the school were desired outcomes of peer mediation, but there was no mention of the intellectual challenge posed by mediation. In fact, the program at M had many mediators who were chosen explicitly to represent students with average and even below-average intellects.

A female mediator at M pointed to the intellectual challenge when she said, “We mediate all ages. The younger kids are likely to listen. The younger kids have simpler conflicts, for example, someone takes another’s hairbrush. The solutions are simple. There is just one solution. The older kids have more complicated conflicts and there are no easy solutions. . . . It [peer mediation] is just a small part of solutions to our problems.”

Ethos of Mediation. We asked the mediators and administrators about the values they felt guided their lives. The responses ranged from the highly coherent Quaker philosophy to that of one boy mediator whose contradictory response was, “I would like to see peace and happiness. Right now, we are going into a war with Haiti. I know we are going to win. I like war stuff.”

Nevertheless, three common frames emerged from the data—service to family and community, the value of avoiding violence, and the worth of the individual.

Service. The mediators who expressed this value identified family and community as recipients of their good will. In the words of an African American boy at EF, “I want to go to Harvard or Yale. I want to go to college pretty far away. I want to experience the world. I want to take my family with me, so they can explore too, because that’s been their dream.” He thought he might become a lawyer because “lawyers help innocent people so they won’t go to jail. This helps communities.” A girl at EF said, “I think helping is most important. I really don’t want to take charge. I want to help make things better. If there is something to be done, I’d be happy to do it. . . . I was in the play because they needed me, asked me.” A girl at M told us that she valued the role of protector. In her words, “I feel that I’ve got to protect my little brother, my friends, I guess, to try and not let them get hurt in any way.” Another girl said simply, “I like helping people.”

Avoiding Violence. Several mediators and several children whose conflicts had been mediated concluded that violence seen was violence learned. They advocated limiting TV viewing and taking particularly violent programs off the air. A program called *Beavis and Butt-head* came under heavy attack. One boy,

a nonmediator at EF, said, "I used to watch a lot more TV than I do now. There is lots of dumb stuff, violent stuff on television. . . . Some of it does [negatively affect children, like] *Beavis and Butt-head*." A girl at EF who had been mediated said, "[Violence] shouldn't be on television." A boy at EF who had been in several fights prior to becoming a mediator claimed that he watched four hours of TV a day but did not watch violent programs. He felt that there was too much violence on TV and that youth became violent "by learning" from TV violence. He concluded, "Fighting ain't the key." Another mediator at EF also watched several hours of TV a day, a lot of it news because, as he put it, "If I don't watch it all the time, I don't know what's going on in the world." He would change TV programming if he could reduce the amount of violence accordingly. In his words, "They should take *Beavis and Butt-head* off TV."

Another strategy of mediators for avoiding violence was to nip verbal conflicts in the bud. A girl at M said, "Peace is to stop conflicts before they become physical. It is very important because once you get physical, it is lost and you have to start all over. Anything to prevent people from getting hurt physically and mentally. This is not something you learn but is what you think. If there had been prevention, there wouldn't have been wars."

Individual Worth. The belief in the inherent worth of each individual was apparent in the responses of the mediators generally but was articulated most clearly at the Quaker school. The document describing the school's philosophy reads:

[Q's] philosophy of education is based on the belief that every person is created in God's image, a philosophy which has been the foundation of Quaker education for three hundred years. We emphasize, therefore, in our school the worth of each child, knowing that each boy and girl has unique gifts, talents, and capacities for learning and achieving. The atmosphere of our school reflects God's love for every person and our growing ability to love one another. In a setting that provides order and stimulation, children are encouraged to discover and develop their talents, to work both independently and cooperatively, and to respect their own worth and the worth of others. The Quaker values of simplicity, community, justice, equality, and peace are evident in our school as a result of this fundamental belief.

Religious education at Q appeared to be minimal. In the words of the principal, "Two-thirds of our parents worry about religion and the other third don't. We don't focus much on the Christian aspect except for the morning devotion. Religion is more of an underpinning, more of a philosophy of how we treat children than trying to train them in Christianity."

Although religious training was downplayed at Q, mediation received top billing and was taught as part of the formal curriculum. As part of the curriculum, students were taught the following social skills: how to follow instructions, how to accept criticism or a consequence, how to accept *no* for an

answer, how to disagree appropriately, how to greet someone, how to make a request, and how to get the teacher's attention. At Q, lessons were prepared and the children role-played their ways through each of the skills. Children were encouraged to discuss the reasons for the correct solutions to the various problems presented.

Conclusions

Two frames of peer mediation emerged, one sophisticated and pragmatic, the other youthful and idealistic. The adult designers and implementers of the programs focused on empowerment, social integration, and status. The children, on the other hand, framed the program as an intellectually challenging opportunity to be of service. Although one mediator viewed the program instrumentally, as a means to a career in law, most of the other participants did not define peer mediation as either enhancing or detracting from career goals. Rather, they joined in order to help others, the school, the society.

Avoiding the adult frames of empowerment and status, the more egalitarian-oriented mediators neither expected nor sought special consideration from teachers and administrators. The students who had been in fights and had gone through a mediation, however, framed mediators as being above the average student, both academically and socially. Even so, this status did not evoke power in the minds of the mediated students. They seemed to recognize the utility of mediation, and they respected the mediators as an eclectic and representative means to a nonviolent school.

The adult administrators in the program underrated the scope of the mediators' abilities to deal with hard-core violent behavior. The adult frame restricted the definition of conflict resolution, whereas the children framed conflict and violence as points on a continuum, a range definition. The young mediators viewed physical violence as falling within the range of their abilities. Also, the mediators framed mediation more broadly as a long-term solution to societal violence and as a means of preventing violence through the learning of lifelong skills. These included taking the role of the other and exercising objectivity, confidentiality, nonracial thinking, and tolerance for diversity. Mediators framed violence as learned behavior, and they were sharply critical of the media, especially TV, for teaching children to be violent.

The peer mediators transformed the adult model to frame their own values, assumptions, and personal relations skills. We were surprised and impressed by this, given the allure that status and power have in the adult world. Also, the youthful framing occurred in school contexts, in which conformity to rules and regulations was expected.

Perhaps by not playing the power, status, and race games that are so popular among adults, the mediators might have been in better shape to gain the confidence and respect that was so obviously reflected in their relationships with peers. Clearly, respect and trust is the backbone of any peer mediation

program that is at all effective. By forging ahead and mediating the more violent conflicts, along with the minor squabbles, mediators served the schools well, relieving teachers and administrators of onerous time-consuming disciplinary activity. The mediators put their unique frame on a program that seemed better for it.

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