

Does Peer Mediation training develop competence in conflict resolution amongst girls in Year 8 and 9?

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1) Context

The Peer Mediation project is a part of the Research Learning Communities partnership between GDST and UCL IoE, in which teachers choose a research based intervention or approach and implement it in their school. The Action Research model has been used to pursue this project at Putney High School with a group of 31 girls in Year 5, 8 and 9 as well as Year 12 helpers.

2) Problem or driver for innovation

A new study by the Department of Education, based on interviews with 30 thousand students, shows that 37 percent of girls aged 14-15 suffers from anxiety or depression.¹ This number has gone up by 10 percent in the last decade. Conversely, the number of boys struggling with similar issues is at 15 percent and is in decline. Experts blame social media and the pressure on girls to have the perfect grades, body and social life.² As a teacher working predominantly with students who have additional needs, I have experienced the levels of damage negative self-talk and lack of compassion can have on students' mental health and wellbeing. Several years ago I have become interested in approaches to teaching students self-compassion and compassion to others. One of the approaches that stood out for me was Nonviolent Communication, also called Compassionate Communication. It was created by Marshal Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist, in response to the levels of depression his patients were experiencing. It is a way of fostering connection and empathy based on the principles of nonviolence- the natural state of compassion. Rosenberg based his approach on the teachings of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

3) The innovation

Peer Mediation is one of the approaches based on principles of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). NVC has been used in schools in over 20 countries over the last couple of decades. NVC begins by assuming that we are all compassionate by nature and that we share the same, basic human needs, and that every action we take is a strategy to meet one or more of those needs. People who practice NVC have found greater authenticity in how they communicate, increased understanding, ability to form deeper connection and resolve conflicts. The NVC community is present in 65 countries around the world.³

In April 2016 I took part in a four day course on Relationship Based Schools ran by an organisation called Seeds of Peace⁴ that promotes NVC in a variety of contexts. Seeds of Peace work in different countries, including war zones, facilitating reconciliation and understanding. Since the training, I was inspired to take part in further training and meetings and I met a number of dedicated trainers who aim to bring NVC into schools. I was inspired by the relevance of their work and the potential of this approach not only to improve emotional intelligence of young people and bring systemic change to schools, but also, in the context of a school like Putney High, to create compassionate leaders of tomorrow. I firmly believe that by strengthening interpersonal connections and improving the quality of relationships amongst the members of the school community, as well as teaching conflict resolution, it may be possible to prevent the escalation of mental health problems in young people and offer them tools to improve their emotional resilience.

The project that followed supports the vision and values of Putney High School such as creating a professional learning community, becoming a centre of excellence for provision of girls' pastoral care and being at the vanguard of new thinking, active research and trialling new ideas. The overarching aim of the project has been to improve emotional literacy and conflict resolution skills, as well as encourage girls to take on leadership roles and to strengthen authentic connections and empathy between the members of the school community.

¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/teenagers-struck-by-depression-epidemic-gnc05fht8>

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-health/11820053/Mental-health-of-British-teen-girls-is-at-crisis-point.html>

³ <https://www.cnvc.org>

⁴ <http://seedsofpeace.org>

Initial findings of the project based on interviews with teachers and leaders, as well as a questionnaire completed by over 200 girls, show (amongst other things) that girls at Putney High School are empathic and compassionate. This created potential for the project to use that competence and not just teach the approach to girls, but also develop their leadership skills and independence by allowing them to share this learning in school and with the wider community.

4) Activities and interactions

In February 2017 girls in Year 8 and 9 completed questionnaires and voted for a 'peer mediator' in their forms – someone they would trust and talk to if there was a conflict or fall out with their friend. They chose two girls in each form who got trained and nominated as the forms' 'peer mediator'. 21 girls were trained by a certified NVC trainer Daren DeWitt⁵ on 21 and 24 February. Parents were informed that Peer Mediation is intended for the 'middle' range of conflicts in a school. Serious conflict will still be dealt with by adults. The aim of the training was for girls to be able to resolve conflicts in their peer group.

The response from girls who were trained was overwhelmingly positive, with 95 percent of girls agreeing that the course increased their competence in resolving conflicts and 90 percent agreeing that it helped them develop leadership skills. Girls engaged in activities and enthusiastically took on the challenge to promote approaches to conflict resolution and empathy in their peer groups.

In March and April 2017 girls have been developing their own way of sharing the learning with their form and organising mediation sessions. They met on 9 March to discuss and share their experiences and discuss next steps. Some of the girls took on leadership roles and lead on aspects of the programme, such as training for younger students, setting up the email and presenting about peer mediation to a wider audience.

In July 2017 eight girls in Year 8 adapted the training programme and resources and delivered two days of training to 10 girls in Year 5 chosen by their peers to be peer mediators. Year 5 girls were thrilled to learn from their older peers and described the course as fun and informative. The Peer Mediators in Year 8 will deliver the course to Year 7 girls next year and there is also an intention to extend this course to other local schools.

5) Learning

Topics covered in training included students' own responses to conflict, self-empathy, win/win approach to conflict resolution, safe ways of expressing anger, helping others to feel safe during mediation, expressing feelings, understanding universal human needs, distinguishing between facts and opinions, active listening skills, seeing both sides of an argument, using questions to help get a solution, working with a partner in mediation, in-depth practice of the five stages of the mediation process and dealing with difficulties during mediations.

As a part of the course, girls were asked to form kind and unkind responses to hurtful things other people might say, both 'inner' responses (self-talk) and how they might respond to the other person. Hearing girls transform their self-talk and responses into those filled with empathy and compassion with such ease, authenticity and awareness of feelings and needs, I was confident their competence in offering empathy and compassion to those in conflict was growing. Girls completed two questionnaires, one directly following the training and one six weeks later. It was clear from their responses that they assimilated the learning and attempted to use it in the context of their peer group. Some girls commented that what they have learned will help them not just in being mediators but to better understand self and other people.

6) Changes in behaviour

Following the initial training, girls made posters and presentations to their forms to promote Peer Mediation. Girls who took part in the training said that it enhanced their understanding of themselves and other people. They were commenting on how everyone should learn about what they have learned and they took on initiative to actually train younger students.

They have had several successful mediation sessions but they felt it was not easy for their peers to share their problems. Even though girls who participated were chosen by their peers as those they would trust to resolve conflicts, it still remains a challenge to encourage students to seek help when they are in disagreement.

⁵ <http://nvc-resolutions.co.uk>

7) Difference

Perhaps the most impact the programme has had is on the participants themselves, as it helped them realise the value of empathy and learn explicitly how they can offer empathy to themselves and others. This new learning led to a collaboration between the Junior and the Senior School, as eight participants redesigned and delivered the two days training to ten Year 5 girls chosen as Peer Mediators. The enthusiasm and engagement demonstrated by Year 5 girls opens up opportunities to use this learning effectively amongst girls in the younger years.

8) Reframing value

The programme aimed to increase students' competence in conflict resolution by offering a framework to understand basic human needs, feelings and steps to offer empathy based on that knowledge. The results of post-intervention questionnaires as well as conversations with teachers and students confirmed this aim has been achieved. The main difficulty the participants observed was the sharing of their new learning with their peers. The next steps should therefore be to nurture a culture of empathy in the school community to allow for more connection, trust and openness. Girls who participated in the Peer Mediation project will be leading on the empathy project next year as student researchers. The learning will be extended to all members of the school community, including parents and teachers.

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