

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Kids Doing it for Themselves – Mediation and Bullying Prevention

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Friday, January 4th, 2013



The last months of 2012 saw three young girls end their own lives in the Northwest of Ireland. Bullying, particularly via social media, was implicated in all three deaths. Around the same time but by coincidence, a national television programme focused on bullying and its effect on the victims, their families and the bullies themselves. (“Bullyproof”, RTE 1) All of this has given rise to extensive debate around how to keep our children safe online and in school. As bullying has become more sophisticated, it appears to have been accepted that interventions targeted at such behaviour must now evolve beyond simple reprimand and sanction of the bully. I was asked to give a lecture on mediation in schools to some students of education recently and, as anticipated, the discussion soon turned to whether mediation has a role to play in addressing bullying. Fortunately I had done my homework and studied a number of school mediation programmes and the more recent literature on this topic. Of particular interest also were the perspectives of the teachers in the audience, all of whom were dealing with bullying-related matters on an on-going basis.

Most of the school mediation projects I looked at used peer mediation, whereby students mediate disputes between other students.(1) Usually all the pupils in the school, or all of those from one year, are given some training in conflict resolution after which pupils who are interested are invited to apply to go on to further training. Once trained, the peer mediators work in pairs, invariably with pupils younger than themselves. Because of the age of the mediators and the people they are working with, there are particular issues that have to be considered in the school setting, such as disclosure of abuse or incidents that are so serious that the involvement of an adult would be essential. Through peer mediation, conflict resolution becomes a learning opportunity as the children are empowered to resolve their disputes and become skilled in the recognition of which conflicts may require adult assistance. The mediators themselves learn from their training, and the subsequent application of the skills they have learned, and the pupils who are availing of the mediation often learn conflict resolution and communication skills in the process, often by observing with behaviour that the mediators are modelling.

While many positive outcome studies from such programmes exist, even here in the Northwest of Ireland(2), using peer mediation, particularly as a response to bullying is not without its difficulties and its critics. Some of the concerns voiced are that mediation, which as we know endeavours to

resolve disputes without apportioning blame, can actually empower the bully and further victimise the student who is being bullied and often already feels significantly disempowered. Permitting the situation to be resolved without acknowledging the harm the bully has caused can perpetuate the sense of victimisation. Furthermore, student mediators will often lack the emotional maturity and psychological know-how to deal with the manipulation that many bullies can bring to the situation, and often even into the mediation room. Some commentators have compared bullying to domestic violence, with reference in particular to the power imbalances that occur in these contexts, and the fact that both bullying and domestic violence tend to occur over a period of time, and aren't usually confined to a single incident. Similar concerns of course exist in relation to family mediation in situations of domestic violence.

Does this mean that mediation has no role to play in relation to bullying? Not at all. What appears to be particularly effective is when peer mediation forms part of a suite of approaches and strategies applied to conflict in schools usually described as “Restorative Practices”, which can be defined as *“a set of behaviours and practices that seek to capitalise on the strengths in social networks and relationships and improve social discipline through inclusive learning and decision making. Essentially it seeks to involve those most affected by decisions as closely as possible in the decision making process, but in a structured framework that provides high support and high challenge/control.”* (3) Such practices come in many forms, and include peer mediation, mentoring, buddying and peer support systems, circle time and talking circles, building communication skills and restorative conferencing, interventions akin to those used in crime and restorative justice projects.

Such tools and skills address many of the root causes of bullying, such as low self-esteem, lack of emotional education and communications skills, and disempowerment. They improve the overall climate in the school and give children the skills to address conflict at any early stage, before it develops into a pattern. They can work therefore, by preventing bullying from arising and becoming commonplace in a school. Not only is this evidenced in the outcome studies, but one of the teachers whom I was lecturing, who works in a school which had put enormous effort into introducing restorative practices, was adamant about the positive impact it had on the school. She said bullying was a rarity in the school, and the reduction in anti-social behaviours such as vandalism was measurable.

All of us as mediators know how mediation can bring about fundamental changes in people's sense of (positive) power, self-worth, and their relationships and communication with others. We also know that it is not a cure all, is not appropriate in every situation and often needs to be supplemented by other strategies. What we often forget however is how quickly children learn and adapt, and how eager they are to use new skills, particularly when compared to adults. If only companies and workplaces, and indeed governments, embraced conflict management skills and mediation programmes as enthusiastically as the kids in the Cool Schools programme, the world might be a very different place...

1. See the Cool Schools programme in New Zealand for a particularly inspiration take on peer mediation. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=epqhqlbt44
2. Mc Garrigle, M., Meade, K. and Santa-Maria Morales, A. Pilot implementation of Restorative Practices in Post-Primary Schools in the Northwest Region (2006) Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway (2006) available at www.transformingconflict.org
3. The Children Acts Advisory Board (abolished 2011).


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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