

# *Peer Mediation as a Viable Option for School Conflict Resolution Programs*

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Albert Bandura (1977) developed the Social Learning (SL) theory to explain that people learn how to act from each other. They learn through observation, mimicry, and modeling. To explain how adolescent aggression develops he coined the phrase “reciprocal determinism,” meaning a person’s environment affects his behavior and vice versa. Bandura’s theory helps to establish a baseline criterion for interpreting the development of adolescent conflict resolution skills. From the ages of 11 to 14, children begin the early transitional phase of childhood to adulthood. At this time, kids start to experiment with more vibrant forms of self-expression, contemplate different social perspectives, move towards independence as they make self-guided decisions, and regularly question established norms. This point in psychological development leaves children highly impressionable as they absorb the actions of their environment and subsequently use their behavior to alter the environment.

With these marked changes comes an increase in conflicts that deviate away from self-centered disputes typically seen in young children and trend toward ones of a more complex, interpersonal nature. In order to nurture their personal growth during this interim phase of life, children require a sense of structure. Middle schools possess the necessary cornerstones to implement such a structure, thus producing a climate capable of fostering positive personal growth in adolescents, particularly in developing conflict resolution skills. This paper seeks to explore conflict resolution policies and programs within education while attempting to determine a better conflict resolution policy for public schools in Buffalo, NY.

This paper will cover multiple topics related to school conflict resolution options both specifically related to Buffalo, NY and public schools on a broader scale. The reader will be exposed to my observations of conflict in high schools and a theoretical framework of how these conflicts arise. The paper then transitions into how peer mediation addresses conflict, options for designing a peer mediation program, and different models such as Peace Pal. It closes with the results of various peer mediation programs, how certain factors affect those results, and a discussion on current Buffalo initiatives like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Long-term trials, extensive data collection, and interviews conducted in studies discussed later in this paper show peer mediation is a viable option as a means of school conflict resolution. Implementing peer mediation programs would force schools to step away from zero-tolerance policies in place of a more all-around beneficial discipline curriculum.

## **My Time at PS 1**

My desire to contribute time to educational programs stems from my past community service efforts in peer tutoring. During high school, I managed a peer tutoring program for four years at a small, public, southwestern New York middle/high school; the peer tutoring program I created still continues at the school today. I designed the initial program on the premise that many students’ academic missteps do not occur because students lack intelligence. Instead, I focused on the existence of other unseen background factors affecting their grades. Some factors may include a student: feeling left behind, having no motivation, lacking interest, or even fearing asking for help. Most students who attended my program were not held accountable for their lack

of action academically, but only received failing grades, which creates a negative feedback loop. For example, if a student does not ask for help for some reason, his/her chance of receiving a failing grade increases. As these failed assignments pile up, the student eventually fails class and falls behind his/her peers. This leads to even less motivation to ask for help and thus the cycle continues.

My experience with peer tutoring in high school pushed me toward enrolling in a college seminar called *Service Learning in Buffalo Public Schools*. The course was built around the ISEP program, a National Science Foundation funded education program that began at University at Buffalo and has since partnered with other colleges. ISEP strives to improve access to and the quality of STEM education within the Buffalo Public School system. It also aims to cultivate a strong partnership between the community and university. To do so, the seminar sends University at Buffalo (UB) students to public schools where they become mentors to middle/high schoolers in a classroom setting. UB students may lead STEM-gear activities, assist teachers, design laboratory experiments, or even coordinate an after-school program. This unique form of service learning combines purposeful community service with an intense educational and reflection component to enrich the learning experience for budding college students. It teaches them the importance of guiding youth towards a brighter future while actively boosting Buffalo Public School STEM education and strengthening community relations.

During the seminar, I paired up with Public School 1 (PS 1). When I began visiting the school, I went in with the same mentality as when I began my peer tutoring program. The school placed me in its 8<sup>th</sup>-grade science classroom for both regents and non-regents students. Largely, my duties consisted of grading papers, setting up laboratory exercises, and leading small group activities related to the day's lesson. For the most part, I believe I effectively helped my students understand the content presented to them, but some major pitfalls did occur along the way.

While at PS 1, I consistently encountered an overflow of conflict, both student-to-student and student-to-teacher, which negatively affected everyone's learning experience. On any given day, students got into arguments, but teachers typically put a stop to such behavior in a timely manner. The biggest cause of disruption was students yelling various vulgar phrases at each other and teachers, going beyond typical idle chitchat. Although these arguments ended, they lacked any resolution. This illustrates how certain teachers did not take responsibility for their lack of classroom management. When said teachers demanded students to sit in silence during a disagreement, they expected all of the disruptions and problems to end indefinitely, which is not a realistic expectation. By ending the argument, a chance remains for the argument to reignite, sometimes to even larger proportions. Instead, students need the opportunity to resolve their differences, either right in the moment or by temporarily leaving the classroom in order to work through the problem.

Due to these standards during the spring quarter of PS 1's most recent school year, a fight between multiple middle school girls broke out and lasted for over three weeks. It was not resolved by the time summer break started. The nature of the fight remains unknown, but seemingly began for superficial reasons. Regardless of the cause, this one fight caused consistent disruptions in numerous classrooms, negatively affecting even those not part of the dispute. The fact that the fight persisted for such an extended period displays a lack of means for conflict resolution at any level. Protocol states that students involved should report to the superintendent to discuss their actions and ensuing consequences, but nothing came of such a meeting. Additionally, bound by numerous laws, codes, and guidelines, even teachers can only intervene

to an extent. This fight illustrates a bigger problem regarding conflict resolution policies or lack thereof.

### **Current Conflict Resolution Perspectives**

The section that follows examines different theories of how conflict arises and why peer mediation proves effective in conflict resolution. Across the country, communities can see an increase in the availability of programs designed to teach prevention strategies against youth risk behaviors. The primary focus of these programs lies within schools, but still the National Center for Educational Statistics reports violence among early adolescents continues to rise. According to Albert Bandura's (1977) SL theory, violence is not an innate characteristic but rather a learned behavior. Therefore, this spike in conflict can be attributed to current social climates, a lack of positive role models, and an individual's perception that he/she cannot contribute to society in a meaningful way. While schools and communities work to create a less volatile environment, it is also important to teach children how to resolve disputes properly. Conflict does not produce destructive or constructive results, but rather how parties choose to resolve a conflict does. People who act destructively later report feelings of hostility and anger with a higher chance of using physical contact as a means of resolution. Acting constructively provides an opportunity for personal development as skills in problem solving and communication improve. Ibrahim Bilgin et al. (2012) conducted a study, "The Effects of Cooperative Learning Techniques on 5th Grade Students' Conflict Resolution and Empathic Tendencies in Science and Technology Course," to reveal that students exhibiting low levels of empathy display relatively aggressive behavior and possess limited problem solving skills. This led Bilgin et al. to conclude a person's positive or negative approach, among other factors, needs to be included in determining outcomes of conflict resolution. Programs teaching prevention strategies against youth risk behaviors hope to discourage kids from picking destructive behaviors when conflict arises.

After long-term trials, extensive data collection, and interviews conducted in studies discussed later in this paper, peer mediation proves a viable option as a means of school conflict resolution. Implementing peer mediation programs would force schools to step away from zero-tolerance policies in place of a more beneficial discipline curriculum. Zero-tolerance policies were initially designed as a response to cases of guns brought on school grounds by students. It later developed into one-size-fits-all solutions with limited indications of refining student behavior. In fact, the use of punitive punishment leads to negative results for most parties. Reactive approaches yield limited results when other means of resolution exist, such as: negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. When students enter a disagreement they possess two ways of ending it: 1) Resolve the conflict themselves through avoidance of either the problem or parties involved, a display of power, or negotiation; and 2) Report the conflict to an authoritative figure. Peer mediation opens up an alternative that lies between these two options and gives students a greater voice in their own problems.

When authority figures give students a greater voice, those students move from being treated as a body in a classroom to a citizen-to-be. Everyday school lessons teach students about issues concerning citizenship, primarily how people should conduct themselves in person-to-person interactions. This crucial set of knowledge can follow students into the adult world and set them up for knowing how to dissolve conflicts positively. By not capitalizing on these key teaching moments, opportunities for pupil empowerment subsequently become compromised due to existing discipline structures. People need to remember that schools reflect culture at large;

therefore, conflict in schools and the ways in which we handle our disagreements reflect community standards.

### Goals of Peer Mediation

This section relates the various overarching goals of peer mediation and begins to discuss the Peace Pal program. Students with low empathic tendencies demonstrate relatively aggressive behaviors and low problem-solving skills. The positivity or negativity of a person's approach to conflict resolution factors into determining the outcome of conflict resolution. **Table 1** displays typical reactions from an adolescent based on the type of attitude he/she projects in the face of conflict. Adolescent cynicism reflects a character under traditional conflict resolution policies while adolescent skepticism relates more to the goals of peer mediation. Peer mediation works to achieve three goals: 1) Enhance students understanding of anger and conflict; 2) Improve the level of knowledge pertinent to conflict resolution, conflict, and mediation; and 3) Peacefully resolve student conflicts. As aggressive student interactions decrease, an environment for positive peer interaction is promoted, thereby reducing incidences of school violence.

**Table 1:** A dimensional analysis of adolescent orientations toward the interpretation of individuals and institutions

Adolescent cynicism	←	→	Adolescent skepticism
Automatic mistrust	←	→	Cautious trust
Doubting (no benefit of the doubt)	←	→	Questioning (benefit of the doubt)
Closed, rigid positioning	←	→	Open, flexible positioning
Dismissive comments	←	→	Challenging comments
Detached/distressed resignation	←	→	Active/critical engagement

LaRusso and Selman (2011)

Student conflict also runs the risk of harming academic development not only for parties involved but also for students outside of the conflict. Research devoted to peer mediation chiefly explores the hypothesis that as peer mediation programs become implemented, schools will exhibit a drop in the number of out-of-school suspensions. A test program named Peace Pal also questioned: 1) How student knowledge in regards to conflict resolution, conflict, and mediation changes after peer mediation training; 2) How often peer mediation successfully resolves student conflict; 3) If disputing students participating in the sessions see it as valuable; and 4) If peer mediators find the sessions valuable (Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuess 2007). The questions explored by Peace Pal can transfer to questions all peer mediation programs hope to answer.

### How to Design a Peer Mediation Program

The next few sections discuss the development of different peer mediation models and how they have proven successful. Students, especially early adolescents, frequently rely on their peers' and their own conflict resolution skills. Therefore, a power shift and change in perception of authority must occur to handle student disputes. Students need to feel involved and gain a voice when attempting to resolve disputes to better increase the likelihood of successful settlements and see positive long-term change in student behavior. Dr. Edward Sellman (2011) of the University of Nottingham developed a technique to determine how a school-specific peer mediation program should be designed. He advises first observing students' behavior in context, then researching the school's historical context in terms of conflict, and finally devise a pilot

program that aims to produce change in rudimentary behavior via intervention. Afterwards, he says to observe the results and alter the program as necessary.

Most often the designed program will involve selecting students to act as student mediators, then subsequently training and equipping them with conflict resolution techniques and negotiation skills. From there, students may voluntarily choose to resolve minor conflicts with the aid of a mediator and tentatively avoid punishment. Teachers' and school administrators' level of involvement varies in different peer mediation models and depends on the severity of a conflict in question. Peer mediation services frequently prevent minor conflicts from escalating. It also gives staff members more time for other activities such as resolving larger conflicts or continuing classroom academics. These reported successful results will be discussed later in case studies.

### **Peer Mediation Models**

The first model, Peace Pal, revolved around the social learning theory. SL theory states that children will replicate social behaviors they previously bared witness to while attempting to adapt to established patterns of peer interaction (Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuss 2007, 2). Creators of Peace Pal translated established cognitive behavioral techniques devised from SL theory to dictate the peer mediation progression. They conducted their study within the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. focusing on a suburban K-5 school.

To begin the program, students acting as Peace Pal mediators and school coordinators underwent peer mediation training. Parties involved learned how to: 1) Define key terms associated with peer mediation; 2) Reflect feelings while understanding the difference between thoughts, feelings and actions; 3) Engage in active listening techniques; and 4) Uphold confidentiality. In the event of a conflict, school coordinators would schedule mediation sessions between the students in question and a student mediator. At the conclusion of these sessions, all parties involved devised a resolution unanimously agreed on and then formalize the agreement by signing a Peace Treaty.

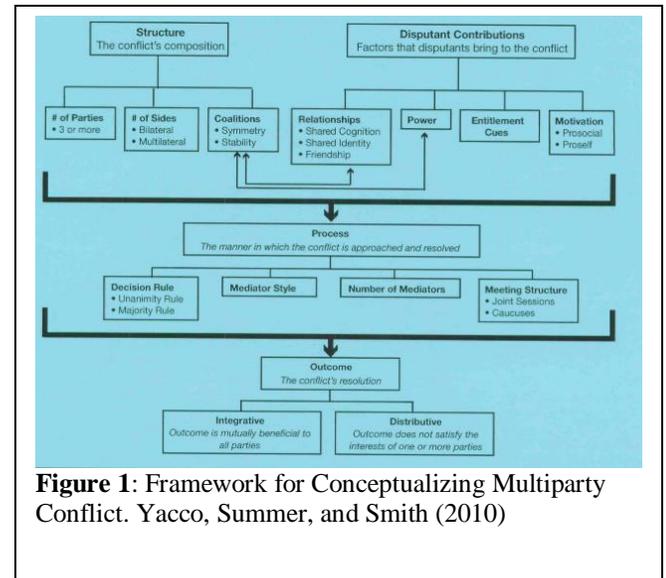
The study concluded that 100% of conducted sessions led to positive conflict resolution, and after one year of peer mediating, the total out-of-school suspensions declined (Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuss 2007, 4). Both participants and peer mediators alike described a positive experience with Peace Pal and continued to quote the program as both helpful and impactful on themselves and others. Peace Pal exhibited a long-term impact in reducing violence throughout the school while providing additional benefits, including students gaining knowledge and techniques influential in constructively resolving conflict. They later showed retention of these new skills months after the study ended, proving conflict resolution skills learned in school can transfer to future disputes. Overall, Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuss (2007) recorded a 36% drop in general disruptive behavior within the test school.

The second model, Restorative Resolution, designed by Jay Zaslav, argues against zero-tolerance policies and believes restorative dispute resolution better benefits not only students but the school as well. Restorative Resolution places the responsibility of resolution on the offending student. It operates on the presumption that students prove more likely to initiate a progressive behavior change when authoritative figures work with them rather than for them (Zaslav 2010, 1). The ultimate goal of the program is to build mutually respectful relationships between all parties as they learn to see each other as human beings while actively listening. In order to

achieve this goal, offenders and victims alike must work to repair damage to not only the victim but the school as a whole. This promotes safety in the school community.

Students, parents, teachers, and administrators all take part in the conflict resolution process. Some techniques utilized include discussion/feedback dialogues, activities that demonstrate consequences of the offending action, and role playing. To confirm a positive resolution, all stakeholders participate in negotiating a settlement which calls attention to both the victim and the school. During this process, participants inevitably develop empathy through learning about one another. Doing so supports Ibrahim Bilgin et al.'s study on conflict resolution relating to empathic tendencies. The described system of Restorative Resolution derives from an in-depth set of principles. After studying the effects of Restorative Resolution, Zaslaw (2010) reported the number of out-of-school suspensions and disruptive behavior decreasing, along with a drop in teacher disrespect incidents. These findings correlate to an effective program that facilitates positive conflict resolution and teaches students new social skills.

The third model attempts to outline a course of action against multi-party conflicts, or those that involve five or more students. While the previous two models prove highly effective in school settings, they are only intended to diffuse two party conflicts. With students, middle school students particularly, multi-party conflicts are more likely to manifest; therefore, enacting a system specifically designed for those types of conflicts proves crucial. As with the other programs, multi-party models also seek to apply an all-inclusive outcome that benefits all parties. Outcomes may include improving skills in understanding various points of view, problem solving, and strengthening friendship. **Figure 1** outlines a plausible system designed to resolve multi-party conflicts peacefully within a school setting. The creators behind this model, Summer Yacco (previous graduate student of the University of Florida) and Dr. Stephen W. Smith (University of Florida) suggest primarily utilizing trained adults for conflicts of this nature and believe peer mediation is better left for two party conflicts (2010).



### Relation to Health Risks

Two school-based programs found to reduce health risk behaviors in adolescence include Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). In the article “Early Adolescent Health Risk Behaviors, Conflict Resolution Strategies, and School Climate” LaRusso and Selman (2011) say that programs promote the development of individual student social skills and competencies. Their research suggests that skills for managing interpersonal conflicts may serve as a protective factor against risk behaviors. Lower levels of risk behaviors specifically link to more cooperative conflict resolution strategies. In contrast, higher levels of risk behaviors relate to aggressive strategies and strategies marked by low concern for the needs of others. LaRusso and Selman (2010) conducted a study on twelve K-8 schools. The schools resided in a medium-sized city that contained both an economically and ethnically diverse environment

somewhere in the northeastern United States. The results concluded that: “58% of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students reported engaging in some form of risk behaviors, with 31% of students engaging in two or more risk behaviors, 17% in three or more risk behaviors, and 9% engaging in four or more risk behaviors” (LaRusso and Selman 2011, 357). As a result, individual students’ conflict resolution strategies represented a statistically significant predictor of multiple risk behaviors.

## **Results**

Peer mediation programs implemented in schools do correlate to a reduction in aggressive behavior and an increase of empathic tendencies in turn, promoting a constructive atmosphere in school leading to increased learning scores (Bilgin 2012, 8). Students also expressed more confidence in areas such as problem solving and logic. These changes resulted from conflict resolution coordinators successfully providing students with new social tools and teaching them how to self-regulate their behavior internally before acting out. As students learn to translate this set of social relations into principles of communication, their internalization becomes externalization. Utilizing this adapted sense of communication in classrooms serves as reinforcement (Sellman 2011, 13).

Children typically initiate physical retaliation as their primary reaction to conflict. To decrease reactionary violence, a gap must develop between students’ action and reaction phases. Peer mediation extends this gap between actions as the program effectively reaches its intended goals. As the gap extends further, school violence, both verbal and physical, reduces. It proves peer mediation programs can infiltrate and shift students’ attitudes and adjust school climate. All models for conflict resolution geared towards students demonstrate a potential in reducing and preventing school violence over long-term periods. These results consistently occurred across various settings and cultures, suggesting a school’s ethnic diversity does not negatively affect attempts at peer mediation. Additional research may be done to expand studies to include school personnel’s adjusted role in conflict resolution as administrations move away from zero-tolerance policies. It should also include parent and community members’ perception of peer mediation programs’ effectiveness.

## **Factors that Affect Program Results**

This section examines how although peer mediation is effective, certain circumstances can set up any model for failure. Multiple factors such as administration support, publicity, and teacher participation can influence acceptance of a peer mediation model. School climate establishes itself as the most powerful factor. LaRusso and Selman noted schools with less supportive conflict resolution climates showed higher rates of skeptical attitudes among students pertaining to the feasibility of resolving conflict nonviolently. In comparison, more supportive conflict resolution climates exhibited the exact opposite attitudes with children, nearing enthusiasm, for initiating non-violent means of resolution (LaRusso and Selman 2011, 8).

Following along with school climate, teacher attitudes proved pivotal in students’ instrumentation of new social tools from peer mediation. LaRusso and Selman (2011) discovered that if students believed teachers did not include the new conflict resolution principles in daily classroom experiences, they doubted the program’s effectiveness. Another limitation of peer mediation stems from underestimation of the proper amount of reform necessary to implement a new model of conflict resolution successfully. By piggy-backing off the old model, presumably a

zero-tolerance policy, a contradiction grows between the new and old methods. Sellman (2011) deduced, “Schools that implement initiatives as if they can be ‘bolted upon’ existing structures, determined by adults, are unlikely to both sustain the initiative and reap any benefits” (14). Many programs crumble because schools fail to rectify traditional means of conflict resolution to include the new peer mediation guidelines.

### **Buffalo Public Schools**

On a final note, here I will discuss current conditions in the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) and suggested courses of action to improve these conditions. Present BPS policies largely resemble those of traditional punitive punishments. However, within the last decade, Buffalo public schools have begun the process of transferring over to a new system with elements similar to restorative conflict resolution. In the 2005-2006 school year, BPS initiated Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This systematic approach, seeking to provide behavioral support and a positive culture for students to achieve emotional, social, and academic success, operates on eight core values. Two main goals include: 1) Increasing consistent use of more effective academic teaching techniques that take into account behavior on multiple levels across the school; and 2) Reducing reactive disciplinary methods.

Another new facet to some Buffalo public schools includes Student Ambassadors. They promote positivity within a school’s atmosphere to enhance the well-being and safety of students and staff. Student Ambassadors are not peer mediators but they do represent a step in the right direction towards introducing a full-scale peer mediation program. When asked about the effects of Student Ambassadors, an advisor at one of the Buffalo high schools using the program commented, “The program instills a sense of responsibility within the students. Anybody can step up and be an Ambassador. I’ve seen students considered to be at risk flourish and succeed when put in the role of leadership. The Ambassadors influence their peers in a positive way and the program creates a more positive school climate” (qtd. in BPS Student Ambassador Program). A Student Ambassador of a different Buffalo high school replied, “I feel I can inspire kids to come to school, builds our school community” (qtd. in BPS Student Ambassador Program). The BPS Board does not require schools to participate in this program; currently only ten out of 57 schools participate.

Recently, PBIS coordinators began pushing for more explicit restorative practices than current conditions can provide. The coordinators gave a presentation called “PBIS and the Restorative Approach.” It outlines how a restorative resolution benefits all people affiliated with a school, how to implement this program, and what to expect. In contrast to the proposed Restorative Resolution system, BPS’s current code of conduct outlines four levels of interventions and responses. It describes classroom intervention, administrative intervention, suspension, and extended suspensions<sup>1</sup>.

Even as the district attempts to include PBIS, student ambassadors, and research restorative resolution practices, the current state of conflict resolution still is composed of primarily punitive punishment. If BPS continues in this manner of mounting a new conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Examine page 15 of BPS’s Official Code of Conduct to review the four levels. Additional entries of interest include pages 16 to 23 for inappropriate and disruptive behaviors and response level, page 25 for student rights and responsibilities, and page 50 for student exclusion procedures

resolution system on top of the preexisting one, its efforts will surely fail. These attempts at change lack the critical mass necessary for positive results, and support Dr. Sellman's (2011) theory of contradiction between new and old models of activity. It can be concluded, through observations at PS 1, that the school definitely does not contain the essential support required to renovate its methodologies of student punishment. It exhibits an adherence to zero-tolerance policies. This school in particular displayed physically and verbally abusive conflicts that continued for multiple weeks. A majority of the students bickered with each other and their teachers throughout class sessions. Additionally, some teachers demonstrated little interest in peaceful resolution of conflict at any level.

### **Conclusion**

Peer mediation techniques implemented in schools prove a viable option for conflict resolution. Multiple models exist for positively resolving conflicts. All showed a decrease in school violence, an increase in supportive school climates and academic achievement, and taught students skills that transfer to real-world applications. This article demonstrates that peer mediation is an effective option as a means of school conflict resolution and a necessary transition as schools rethink previous zero-tolerance policies. Different from their original intention, zero tolerance policies now act as one-size-fits-all solution to conflict. This creates a climate with limited indications of refining student behavior, unlike peer mediation programs.

BPS placed itself in a position where conflict between new and old resolution systems will occur unless the district changes its attitudes towards reform and gains more support. PS 1 could greatly benefit from a peer mediation program, especially as its incidences of violence increase. This school is a perfect candidate for the Peace Pal model because students desire to see a change in the school climate but lack the proper support. By placing the responsibility of peacefully resolving conflicts on the students, we bypass this problem and move towards teaching students higher social skills. Above all, accountability must be appropriately assigned at every level of conflict.

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