

Peer Mediation as a Mechanism for Resolution of Inter-Personal Conflicts among Students

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Abstract

This study was set out to assist students of A.M.E Zion Girls Senior High School to resolve their inter-personal conflicts which affected their academic performance and marred their social relationship using peer mediation. The action research design was employed using simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Interview, questionnaire, and observation were the instruments used to collect data from 60 students for the study. It was discovered from the study that the students placed value in things they were involved in especially on issues that concerned them. They therefore found meaning to the peer mediation approach to resolving their inter-personal conflicts. The researcher used the vehicle of 'Peace Club' in the school to implement the intervention. Some recommendations based on the findings included the establishment of structures by Ghana Education Service (GES) in all the Junior High and Senior High Schools in the country for peer mediation groups to be formed, the training of selected teachers from Junior and senior High schools as mediators who would in turn train students in their schools to obtain mediation skills, and the provision of facilities such as rooms in schools to enhance the conduct of peer mediation.

Keywords: Peer Mediation, Conflict, Students, Mediator, Senior High School

1 Introduction/ Background to the study

Conflicts are natural in every human collection and for that matter always occur. The concept conflict is used to refer to the state of tension or disagreement within oneself or between two or more parties as a result of internal or external differences (Anderson, 2001). Conflicts, a natural part of life are brought on by our different beliefs, experiences, and values and when not well managed, can harm relationship. Certainly, the ability to manage conflicts is such an essential tool of life since when conflicts are well managed they become a rich source of knowledge and experience (Gaya, 2001). This must be the concern of all peace loving persons.

Often however, when one asks people about their concept or opinion of conflict, one hears such words as war, fight, chaos, oppression, aggravation, aggression, destruction, crisis, misunderstanding and a host of others. A closer look at the above words would reveal that they are all negative words or at least have negative connotations. This suggests that our assumption of conflicts is mostly negative; hence, upon hearing the word conflict, our minds are tilted towards negative connotations. This is reflective of how most of us were brought up; to see conflicts as something we should run away from or avoid. But is conflict always negative? In the Chinese language, conflict means "opportunity for change" (Action Aid Ghana, 2001: 4). Going by this, it presupposes that conflict on its own is neither negative nor positive.

What determines the way the conflict goes are background information about conflicts and individuals' personal attitude. These dictate how we manage conflicts. Conflicts managed positively or constructively result in development change, understanding, knowledge, progress, peace love etc. but when negatively managed, conflicts give us the negative result we often have (Coleman, 2000). There certainly is an urgent need for proper and effective management of conflict often requiring skilful and technical intervention by experts (Zutter, 2004). This is very important because of the fact that conflicts are a natural part of life and if not managed carefully can harm relationship.

The students of A.M.E. Zion Girls Senior High School had difficulties in resolving their inter-personal conflicts amicably. This was indeed unfortunate since it is important that students live with each other in a conflict free atmosphere in the school as a community as this will help them learn by themselves and with themselves. This is particularly vital since in my estimation, the teacher's presence and role in the teaching and learning process is only about twenty five percent (25%).

This work was therefore aimed at helping the students of A.M.E. Zion Girls Senior High School to amicably resolve their inter-personal conflicts through peer mediation so as to promote their academic performance and social relationship. Two research questions guided the researcher in the study. These included:

1. How would peer mediation effectively help students to resolve their inter-personal conflicts?
2. How can students apply mediation skills to resolve their inter-personal conflicts?

Peer Mediation as an approach to resolving conflicts

Mediation is a communication process whereby an acceptable impartial third party assists disputants to resolve their problems in their own way. This method of conflict resolution is based on the notion that power belongs to

the people and as such people be equipped with skills to make decisions on issues that affect their lives Cohen (1995). According to Franklin (2008), mediation is a process of solving disputes and conflicts in which a neutral third party acts as a moderator for the process. The goal in mediation is to work out the differences between the parties constructively (Carl & Sleeter, 2005).

Peer mediation is where a mate or colleague of disputants voluntarily initiates measures in a process to help resolve the problem. Mediation provides schools with an alternative to the traditional practice of using disciplinary committee and counselling co-ordinators to resolve students' misunderstandings. Students involved in this process, either as mediator or disputants learn new ways of handling conflicts.

In peer mediation, trained students help mates identify their problems behind the conflict and to find solutions. As a matter of fact, peer mediation is not about finding out who is right or wrong. Instead, students are encouraged to move beyond the immediate conflict and learn how to get along with each other. It is effectively used to solve problems involving names-calling, rumours, bumping on each other, bullying etc. Again, it helps to arrest conflicts from escalating (Rouch & Hall (1993).

In the view of Emerson (1990), the objective of mediation is to help parties to a conflict within an environment of controlled communication to reach solution to their problems. It involves dialogue but with the presence of a third party. To achieve this, the mediator's role is to create an enabling environment for parties to carry out the dialogue sessions leading to the resolution of pending conflict. For Charton (2000), the mediator must have the confidence of the parties involved in the conflict. He or she must also be objective, neutrally balanced, supportive, non-judgmental and astute in questioning and to try to drive parties towards win-win as opposed to win-lose outcome.

Mensa-Bonsu and Effah (2003), also see mediation as negotiation and as a result, the mediator must strive to avoid taking sides and remain neutral throughout the process. Rules should be negotiated in advance as to how the mediation would proceed, and how parties may express themselves in a non-destructive ways so as to maintain respect throughout the process language that would create negative feelings should not be permitted and culturally, appropriate mechanisms should be found for the parties to ventilate their grievances. The seating arrangement adopted during the mediation must facilitate cooperation rather than promote confrontation and each person must be treated with equity.

In acting as an agent for resolving a conflict, the mediator must suspend judgment on the conduct of the disputants and should not substitute his or her own desires for those of the parties. Instead, the parties must be encouraged to try and see things from the other party's point of view and thereby help them to appreciate the need to shift from entrenched positions (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). The parties must retain ownership of the process and must be satisfied that they have received as good solution as the circumstances permit. The agreement reached must be written down to avoid having to depend on individual memory for what was agreed upon at the time (Schrumf, Grawford, & Bodine, 1999).

Methodology

The study was an action research with the aim of helping the students of A.M.E. Zion Girls Senior High School to resolve their inter-personal conflicts through peer mediation thereby enhancing their academic performance and social relationship through peaceful co-existence. The instruments of structured questionnaire, interview and observation were used for the study.

The sample for the study included sixty (60) students who voluntarily agreed to be members of Peace Club that was used by the researcher as platform for the teaching of mediation skills. Out of the sixty (60) students, thirty (30) had conflict situations and received attention of Peace Club and ten (10) were peer mediators.

Implementation of intervention

Peer mediation was the major approach the researcher employed to enable students to resolve their conflicts. The mediation group of Peace Club at regular meetings were taught mediation skills. They practiced mediating to solve assumed conflicts of mates at the meetings. At practice, one person acted as the mediator and other two students as disputants over a chosen conflict situation at a time. After 20 minutes practice, there was debriefing and helpful and unhelpful elements were discussed. When the mediation group members became conversant with mediation skills, they started to handle students who had conflicts.

Four stages were followed in handling students who had conflicts situations. At stage one, the student mediators met the disputants separately. The aim was to prepare the disputants for the mediation process. At such meetings, the mediators introduced themselves and explained their role. They also gave the assurance of confidentiality of the process. Additionally, they discussed the benefits in resolving the conflict and validated the agreement of the disputants to use the mediation process.

The objectives of the first stage included to develop trust in the disputants on the process, get agreement of the disputants to use the process for the resolution of the conflict and for the establishment of causes of the conflict and as well defuse anger in disputant due to the existence of the conflict.

At stage two, everyone was together. Here efforts were made to develop positive environment, define the problem, and gather information on the conflict from disputants and also to validate the concerns and feelings on each disputant.

As a result, the mediator welcomed disputants and made them to introduce themselves. Next, the purpose of the session was declared and assurance that whatever was said would remain in the room. The rules of the process were next laid and each disputant was made to agree to each rule.

Disputants at this point were made to define the problem as they had in minds and mediators took down notes. The disputants were asked to state how they felt with the mediator asking questions that would help them to understand the problem.

The third stage was where disputants were made to talk directly to each other. The disputants were helped to understand each other and appreciate how the other experienced the conflict. The disputants were further encouraged to learn to relate to each other in an atmosphere or environment that allowed them to work and communicate together. Here the mediator(s) guided the communication process.

The fourth and final stage of the mediation process was where the disputants were helped to develop fair and realistic solution acceptable to both or all. The agreed solutions were written into an agreement book and disputants made to sign the agreement book. To avoid rumour spreading, the disputant were encouraged to relate with each other closely. The disputants were congratulated for their hand work in reaching an agreement.

Analysis and discussion of findings

Data was first gathered from the students on how they resolved their inter-personal conflicts before the introduction of the peer mediation in the school.

Table 1: Resolution of conflicts before peer mediation in the school

Resolved by	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peers	03	10
Victims themselves	02	17
School Authority	05	30
Unresolved	20	43
Total	30	100

Source: Field data (2014)

From the table above, it could be realised that, thirty (30) conflict cases were experienced by the students who were members of the Peace Club with their friends and mates on campus before the researcher introduced the intervention. Of the thirty (30) conflicts cases before the intervention, only ten (10) of them were resolved. Out of the ten (10), three (3) of them were resolved through the assistance of peers. Two (2) of them were resolved by the victims themselves whiles the school authority aided the resolution of five (5) of them. However, twenty (20) of the cases rather on the higher side were unresolved.

It is evident from the data above that the school as institution was not able to help students to resolve their inter-personal conflicts. But Addae-Mensah (2000) contends that education must result in the holistic development of individuals to become asserts to their societies and the nation at large. Education must equip the recipients with the requisite skills and ability to solve personal and societal problems. The traditional school authority approach to conflict resolution usually through the Disciplinary Committee or teacher counsellor serves a little in helping students with conflicts. The element of punishment for offenders scared students from reporting their conflicts for redress. This made students to live with conflicts which got escalated affecting their academic and social lives on campus. This is supported by the massive support for peer mediation in the school

Table 2: Success levels of conflict resolution with peer mediation in the school

Outcomes	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Successful	27	90
Unsuccessful	03	10
Total	30	100

Source: Field data (2014)

Following the introduction of the peer mediation approach in the school, students opted to have the inter-personal conflicts resolved through that approach. Data was collected from thirty of the students who had their conflicts resolved through the peer mediation on the levels of success. Of the thirty (30) cases that were handled by the mediation team, twenty seven (27) of them were successfully resolved. This is an expression of 90% success. To the students who had they conflict cases resolved, the mediation process gave them the opportunity to express how they felt about the problem. It also allowed them to freely and without fear of punishment express themselves. This made them to appreciate the result because they were a part of the resolution process.

Of the three (3) cases that were unresolved, two of these cases were traced to their homes. The students involved in these cases declared that their families had problems between them and this made members of each

family enemies to the other.

The students enumerated communication, critical thinking skills, innovation, creativity, listening, analysis and note taking skills as benefits from the peer mediation process. They also mentioned accusations and indecisions at certain times as problems. Monitoring the progress situation after mediation was also mentioned as a problem. Both mediators and those mediated for appreciated the effectiveness of peer mediation for conflicts resolution among students. It is therefore not surprising that ninety six percent (96%) of the respondents would prefer their conflicts resolved via mediation and only four percent option for school authority including teachers.

Table 3: Resolution of conflicts if they arise

Mode of resolution	Frequency	Percentage (%)
School Authority	02	3.3
Peer Mediation Group	57	95
None	01	1.7
Total	60	100

Source: Field data (2014)

From the above table, it could be observed that an overwhelming number of respondents supported the handling of their conflicts by Peer Mediators should they arise in the future. Whiles two (2) supported that the school authority should handle their conflicts. This strongly indicates that the students appreciate the effectiveness of the Peer Mediation Team's work and peer mediation as an approach to conflicts resolution.

Summary of findings

It was discovered through the research work that conflicts among students could be well managed by students themselves especially as in organized peer mediation. This was evident from the fact that, of the thirty (30) conflict cases before the research, only nine (9) of them were resolved but twenty seven out of the thirty cases that came before the peer mediation team were resolved.

Again, it was realised that students ceased the opportunity to learn everything positive in every situation. Some of the things learnt included communication skills, negotiation, listening, discussion and problems solving skills. These are very necessary skills for meaningful living.

Peer mediation brought about the realisation of a significant decrease in disciplinary issues. The students could avoid punishment from the school authority for relatively small problems which were inter-personal conflicts which they were already battling with. More positively, it helped them to realise that they could really do something significant about problems they had with others.

Moreover, it was identified that the traditional school authority approach to conflict resolution usually through the Disciplinary Committee or a teacher counsellor served a little in helping students with conflicts. The element of punishment for offenders scared students from reporting their conflicts for redress. This made students to live with conflicts which got escalated affecting their academic and social lives on campus. This is supported by the massive support for peer mediation in the school.

Finally, students became highly innovative, initiative and dynamic when put in the centre of matters. They became more responsible dealing with matters from their own perspectives and levels of understanding. This accounts for a high possibility of success and the attainment of self satisfaction.

Recommendations

Informed by the experiences and result of the research, the researcher wishes to give the following recommendations:

1. Structures must be established by Ghana Education Service (GES) in all the Junior High and Senior High Schools in the country for peer mediation groups to be formed. This would create a framework for students in these institutions to practice peer mediation and subsequently derive the maximum benefits that come with it. This must be carried out as a national program.
2. Teachers from the various schools in the country must be trained as mediators who would in turn train students in their schools to obtain mediation skills. These student mediators must be constantly aided to carry out peer mediation in the school with their mates and friends.
3. All schools must provide facilities such as rooms to enhance the conduct of peer mediation in the schools. Logistics and financial assistance must also be given by school authorities in the school since proper management of conflicts would directly influence the academic output of students as well as their social life.
4. Districts and Regional Mediation Teams must be instituted and workshops organised for teachers and students mediators. These workshops would equip them with skills and techniques of mediating to make them function effectively as mediators.
5. Institutions, organisations and firms should establish desks and offices responsible for conducting mediation services for peaceful resolution of conflicts at work places. This would ensure peace, unity,

and harmony which would step up productivity within the set up.

Conclusion

The approach to the resolution of conflict which is a natural phenomenon is a very critical element for the survival of institutions and organizations. The best approach is the one that places the victim in the process for it does not only win the confidence and support of the individuals involved but also enhances the degree of success in the process. This makes peer mediation the best option for conflict resolution in schools and educational institutions. Effort must be made by all stake holders to education to make the approach of peer mediation work.

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