

**Peer Mediation Through the Lens of Montessori: The Effects of
Peer Mediation on Peer Interactions**

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Abstract

Peer mediation is conflict resolution by youth, for youth. In a Montessori setting, students are given responsibility, freedom, and choice, often working without adult guidance. Peer mediation allows students to extend that freedom and responsibility to their own conflict resolution. The purpose of this action research project was to explore peer mediation through the lens of Montessori and the effects of peer mediation on peer interactions. Research was conducted in a suburban public charter Montessori school. It took place in an upper level elementary classroom consisting of 25 students in grades 4, 5, and 6, with an equal balance of boys and girls. The researcher used confidential student surveys and observations to analyze the effects of peer mediation in a Montessori Upper Elementary classroom. The research concluded that peer mediation in a Montessori environment had a positive effect on peer interactions.

Keywords: peer mediation, peer interactions, elementary, Montessori, behavior, conflict resolution

Literature Review of Related Articles

Introduction:

Peer mediation is an approach to conflict-resolution that allows students to act as mediators for one another and can help students learn how to approach and resolve conflicts and disagreements. Peer-assisted mediation fits into the scope of Montessori, where students have the freedom and responsibility to find the solutions to their own conflicts without adult intervention (unless absolutely necessary). Students can also learn the art of negotiation, respectful argument, and compromise – all of which are necessary skills in adulthood.

In preparation for my own research project on peer mediation, I have found several examples of peer mediation projects, their strategies for implementation, results, and reflections. I have correlated these findings into this literature review to help me focus my own research project, answering these four questions: What is peer mediation and how do I implement it? What do peer mediators do? How does peer mediation affect peer interactions? and What are possible outcomes of peer mediation?

Peer Mediation and Its Implementation

Peer mediation defined.

According to The Resolution Center, peer mediation is “problem solving by youth with youth. It is a process by which two or more students involved in a dispute meet in a private, safe and confidential setting to work out problems with the assistance of a trained student mediator” (Peer Mediation, 2017). Peer mediation, when incorporated correctly, allows students to recognize individual needs and feelings that arise with conflict, and guides each situation to

peaceful resolution and compromise without adult interference. “The conflicts in schools that require negotiation and mediation are based on individuals’ differing interests within a situation...[peer mediation] teaches students how to resolve conflicts...constructively” (Johnson, 2004, p. 2). Pamela S. Lane-Garon, one of the authors involved in the *Mediator Mentors Program*, writes in the *Journal of Peace Education* that peer mediation “contributes to adaptive human development in that it provides a model for considering another’s diverging point of view, accurately inferring another’s feelings, cooperatively resolving a shared problem, and experiencing satisfaction with a mutually-designed solution” (Lane-Garon, 2005, p. 3). A literature review titled, “Institutionalizing Peer-Mediated Instruction and Interventions (PMII) In Schools: Beyond ‘Train and Hope’”, written by Margaret E. King-Sears, speaks of the difficulty of describing a universal model that would be appropriate for all schools or settings. “There is no ‘one size fits all.’ Furthermore, successful change plans do not contain certain steps or elements without also giving considerable attention to how those elements are accomplished” (King-Sears, 2001, p. 9). Each implementation of peer-mediated intervention is unique and must be adapted to fit the specific circumstances and goals of the implementing institution.

Training models.

Many peer mediation models include training peer mediators to assist classmates when conflicts or disagreements arise. The *Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers Program (TSP)* trains students for 30 days, 30 minutes per session, followed by weekly training in negotiation and mediation for the remainder of the year (Johnson, 2004). The *Mediator Mentors Program* utilizes an initial two-day training for peer mediators, followed by 150 hours of mentoring throughout the year (Lane-Garon, 2005). At Emmett Elementary School, students were trained in

five 30-minute sessions in order to achieve a broad peer-mediated approach to resolving conflicts (Gable, 1995). Benarty Primary School in Scotland implemented a peer mediation program called “Playground Pals”. A brief summary written by Karen Gallacher explains that students volunteer to become Playground Pals and are trained to “encourage friendship, games and some also act as peer mediators to help the students deal with any problems” (Gallacher, 2011, p. 1). A conflict-resolution curriculum designed for incorporation into standard cultural curriculum in California utilized lessons that ranged 46-60 minutes, allowing students to explore conflict and resolution from a historical standpoint in order to face conflict in the everyday (Ransom, 2001). At McNair Middle School, six weeks were spent introducing peer mediation and recruiting peer mediators, six weeks were spent training the recruits, and six weeks were spent developing a mediation center (Thompson, 1996).

Strategies of peer mediation.

Emily Shoerning’s article, “Using Language Positively,” centers around the language of negotiation. Negotiation includes asking questions, planning and conducting investigation, and analyzing data. Negotiation is about ideas, not people – nobody ‘wins’. Thinking about what negotiation is and how language can foster negotiation can assist teachers in creating learning environments that support peer-to-peer negotiation (Shoerning, 2013). The program at Emmett Elementary School follows five basic steps for mediation: select intervention, select peer mediators, prepare peer mediators, apply ‘fair pair’ rule (to eliminate a problem behavior, you must teach a replacement behavior), and incorporate contingencies (Gable, 1995). At McNair Middle School, students applied to become peer mediators and were selected across grade levels to ensure neutrality. The program was supported by staff volunteers who acted as counselors, but

they were not permitted to sit in on the mediation unless requested by the participants (Thompson, 1996). Within Beaulieu's study, four preschoolers were chosen to facilitate peer mediation. The educators "...used instructions, modeling, role-play, and feedback to teach peer mediation" (Beaulieu, 2013, p.5) The curriculum designed for California schools was divided into three themes: conflict resolution skills, diversity and conflict, and mediation (Ransom, 2001). Many Montessori schools have developed and implemented conflict-resolution programs, including peer mediation programs. Cheryl Duckworth wrote an article titled, "Teaching Peace: a Dialogue on the Montessori Method," stating that some Montessori schools "...have woven ethics, social and spiritual development, peace and conflict resolution and international-mindedness into the daily fabric of their classrooms. The most important goals of these schools are to develop compassion, kindness, respect, global awareness, confidence and independence in each student. By focusing on the whole child, as Montessori called for, they are helping to create global 'citizens of the future'" (Duckworth, 2006, p. 9).

The Role of Peer Mediators

Many peer mediation approaches utilize similar steps to facilitate peaceful outcomes. *TSP* incorporates four basic steps to the mediation procedure: understand the nature of the conflict; choose an appropriate conflict strategy; negotiate to solve the problem; and mediate other's conflicts. *TSP* also includes 6 parts to help student understand both points of view within a conflict: describe what you want; describe how you feel; describe reasons for your wants and feelings; take the other perspective and summarize your understanding of their wants and feelings and underlying reasons; invent three optimal approaches to resolve the conflict; choose the wisest course of actions and agree with a handshake (Johnson, 2004). At Emmett

Elementary, students also learn four basic steps in the peer-mediation process. “In five 30-minute sessions, students learn to (a) identify the target behavior, (b) challenge the inappropriate behavior of a classmate (‘I don’t like being called names’), (c) ignore provocative acts (break eye contact, walk away), and (d) prompt and positively reinforce incompatible responses (e.g., smile and express verbal approval)” (Gable, 1995). Playground Pals at Benarty Primary School attend meetings to learn new activities and games, help stop disagreements and fights, and are able to organize special events (Gallacher, 2011).

Shoerning’s article stresses the importance of active listening – it is a part of negotiation that is just as important as speaking. Students need to feel what they say is important, and while listening actively to teachers is taught, students do not always listen actively to peers. Asking students to summarize each other’s speech can be a helpful way to encourage listening actively to peers (Shoerning, 2013). The California curriculum also stresses that students are not simply passive learners, but the principles of conflict resolution. In her review, King-Sears also noted the importance that peer mediators continue to grow academically: “Students involved in PMII need to experience academic gains from different starting points” (King-Sears, 2001, p. 4).

The preschool study for *Peer Mediated Intervention (PMI)* encourages teachers to take on a supporting role. They should schedule time to mentor peer mediators, being sure to encourage mediation while discouraging mediators from doing everything for their partners (Harris, 2009). At McNair Middle School, students were trained in two 20-day sessions, 50 minutes each. The students were provided guidelines for appropriate dismissal from class in order to facilitate peer mediation with as little disruption to the regular school day as possible. During this training, emphasis was placed on understanding feelings as well as the relationship between feelings and human behavior. Students would be selected as mediators across grades to help ensure neutrality.

Peer mediators would have weekly meetings with advisors, which included additional training to provide support and continuous evaluation (Thompson, 1996).

Peer mediators are trained and guided by teacher or counselor mentors and are trusted to mediate conflicts without interference. Because of this, selection of peer mediators should be a thorough and thoughtful process, though all students should be considered if they express an interest. Guidelines will need to be succinct and complete, making the job of peer mediator as straight-forward as possible. The use of proper language as well as active listening and empathy needs to be stressed as part of the peer mediator training process.

The Effects of Peer Mediation on Peer Interactions

Peace education encourages positive peer interactions. Shoerning writes that thinking of what negotiation is and how language can foster negotiation can assist teachers in creating learning environments that support peer-to-peer negotiation. Students will not engage in negotiation if they don't think their ideas or those of other students are important. "In a classroom in which students must raise their hands to speak but their teacher may interrupt them at any time, teachers mostly lecture, or students are only asked to provide "right answers," it is unlikely that spontaneous or developed peer-to-peer negotiation will occur" (Shoerning, 2013, p. 3).

Mediator Mentors also demonstrates the power of language and communication, including the effects on knowledge and communication of conflict, relationship between conflict parties, and processes for constructive conflict management. "Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) includes the following language: CRE models and teaches, in culturally meaningful ways, a variety of processes, practices and skills that help address individual, interpersonal, and institutional conflicts, and creates safe and welcoming communities. These processes, practices and skills

help individuals understand conflict process and empower them to use communication and creative thinking to build relationships and manage and resolve conflicts fairly and peacefully” (Lane-Garon, 2005, p. 4). The Lane-Garon article also suggests that all learning is incorporated into relationships (Lane-Garon, 2005).

“Research has shown that students are capable of promoting academic, social, and behavioral changes in their classmates and/or friends. Casting peers in the role of change agent has several distinct advantages over adult intervention. For instance, peer-mediated intervention increases opportunities for students to practice appropriate behaviors in varied settings, with greater frequency, and with youngsters of diverse backgrounds, which may support the maintenance and generalization of desired student behavior.” (Gable, 1995, p. 2).

Harris writes of the advantages of *PMI* in inclusive classrooms: that students “increase social and language skills...learn to accept and appreciate differences among peers...increase self-confidence by being positive role models...” (Harris, 2009, p. 2). Beaulieu also notes that within the preschool setting, teaching children peer reminders and praise improved compliance with classroom and teacher expectations (Beaulieu, 2013). Students at Benarty Primary School enjoy the peer interaction elements of their mediation program. “The aspect of the training which resonated most with the children was the mediating during difficulties. The pupils relished the idea of sitting with their peers and listening to both sides of the disagreements and working together to sort out difficulties” (Gallacher, 2011, p. 2). The summary of findings at McNair Middle School stated, “The benefits and outcomes have been documented in terms of reduced incidences of fighting...increased self-esteem...enhanced problem-solving skills...and improved school morale” (Thompson, 1996, p. 4). As students are guided to meet peaceful resolutions to

conflicts, they are acquiring skills to do so outside of the classroom or other non-peer-mediated circumstances. In an article titled, “Altering Educational Environments Through Positive Peer Reporting,” Christopher H. Skinner writes that “opportunities to practice acquired skills have been shown to be effective and may be necessary to enhance skill fluency and maintenance. When these opportunities to practice acquired skills occur in natural environments, then generalization and adaptation may be enhanced” (Skinner, et. al. 2002, p. 3).

As with most things in a Montessori setting, students can be responsible for their own conflict resolution. This responsibility can have an impact on the individuals involved as well as on the community as a whole. A sense of ownership allows students to feel comfortable and confident in their environment, giving each the boldness to express thoughts and feelings without worry of rejection or dismissal. Students are able to work together to achieve peace in the classroom and will develop skills and tools to bring peaceful resolution to their world of adulthood in the future.

Possible Outcomes of Peer Mediation

There are many possible benefits and advantages to peer mediation. *TSP* concludes that every student is taught to manage conflicts constructively, promoting civic values within the curriculum (Johnson, 2004). Shoerning writes that when students are engaging in negotiation, teachers will notice that classroom discussions become richer. Students begin to supply reasons for what they believe, they will question and defend ideas, and new ideas will emerge from students during discussion (Shoerning, 2013). According to King-Sears, “PMII [carries] so much promise and potential for affecting the lives of more students and teachers in desirable ways...” (King-Sears, 2001, p.5). Duckworth also concludes with positive outcomes specific to the

Montessori setting by writing that "...the explicit inclusion in the curriculum of conflict resolution skills, respect for diversity and the translation of this into social action results in students who feel empowered and inspired to engage the challenges we all face as global citizens" (Duckworth, 2006, p. 14).

At the close of the *Mediator Mentor Program's* first year, "analysis of change scores revealed that mediators demonstrated significantly higher gains on measures of social-cognitive development when compared to non-mediators. Although mediators and non-mediators scored no differently at pretest, the difference was highly significant at posttest" (Lane-Garon, 2005, 7). There was also a relationship discovered between students who were trained and acted as mediators and their scores on Language Arts standardized tests. "...there was no significant relationship between Language Arts scores and being a mediator in 2003 (before program implementation). However, in 2004, a highly significant correlation between mediator status and increase in Language Arts scores was revealed" (Lane-Garon, 2005).

The California culture curriculum concludes that presenting diverse needs encourage students to improve their levels of acceptance and empathy, as well as their understanding of differences in those around them (Ransom, 2001). And within the preschool setting, "researchers have shown that peer-mediated contingencies can be used effectively to improve children's academic achievement and social interactions with peers and to decrease off-task behavior" (Beaulieu, 2013, p. 10). After peer mediation was taught, there was an increase in peer praise, which had never been observed before the program was initiated, and overall, teachers were more satisfied with helpfulness, compliance, and attention with peer mediation implemented (Beaulieu, 2013).

McNair Middle School researchers summarize that the peer mediation program implementation was used to “promote positive school climate, promote student empowerment and responsibility, increase student self-esteem, promote school safety, learn effective communication skills, [and] reduce discipline referrals to administration” (Thompson, 1996). Within the middle school, suspension decreased 18.5% during first year; decreased by 50% by the end of second year; 90% of mediation cases were resolved in first and second year; requests for most mediation cases were from students, followed by teachers and administrators; belief that peer mediation works and that it has improved the morale of the school was expressed by 92% of teachers in the survey (Thompson, 1996).

Literature Review Reflection and Conclusion

Peer mediation has proven to be effective in each of these studies. Students and educators reflected positively on their experiences, and the results could be seen in each study. Peer mediation practices in each study increased a student’s sense of belonging and ownership, increased capabilities of empathy and understanding, and increased student behavior and compliance. Differences were measured at both an individual and global level for many of the studies, and each showed a positive impact on personal and global attitudes and behaviors.

It was my intention to incorporate many of the aspects of peer mediation found throughout these articles into one approach, adapting the methods and procedures and synthesizing them into the best fit for peer mediation within my individual Montessori classroom. By adapting these methods to best-fit the Montessori environment, I planned to expand on our current Peace Education with peer-mediated intervention and conflict resolution.

The effects of peer mediation implementation on peer interactions were measured through observation and the use of whole-class and individual student surveys.

Action Research Methodology

Participants and Setting

This small quasi-quantitative action research project was implemented in a public charter Montessori school in a suburban area of Minnesota. The school enrollment included nearly 250 students in grades pre-K through eight. The involved classroom included 25 upper elementary students: eight fourth year, ten fifth year, and seven sixth year students. Four of the students had academic Individualized Education Plans, and an additional four students were receiving ADSIS or Title services for math and/or reading. One student was on a behavior plan with an ADSIS behavior interventionist.

Purpose and Materials Used

The purpose of this action research project was to measure the effect of peer-mediated intervention on peer interactions in a traditional Montessori upper elementary classroom. Within that study, four subsidiary questions were asked: What is peer mediation and how do I implement it? What do peer mediators do? How does it affect peer interactions? What are other possible outcomes of peer mediation?

A pre- and post-research survey was given to each participant in order to create quantitative data to help analyze the overall impact of peer mediation. The questions were

identical in each survey and utilized weighted responses on a scale from one to five. The seven questions asked were:

- How well do you get along with your classmates?
- How often do you have disagreements or problems with your classmates?
- Do you ever dislike coming to school because of problems with your classmates?
- How likely are you to ask adults for help when you have problems with classmates?
- How likely are you to try to solve problems with classmates together?
- When you have problems with classmates, are you able to share your side of the story?
- When you have problems with classmates, do you respectfully listen to their side of the story?

Each conflict utilized two forms for the mediation process. These forms are the same as those used in the “Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers” program (Johnson 2004). The first form was filled out by each student involved in the conflict.

Conflict Report Form

Date: _____ Name: _____ ___ Male ___ Female
 Grade: _____ Teacher: _____ Subject Area: _____

1. Who was your conflict with: _____
2. What did you want? _____
 - a. How did the other's actions stop you from getting what you want? _____
 - b. How did you feel? _____
3. What did the other person want? _____
 - a. How did your actions stop him or her from getting what he or she wanted? _____
 - b. How did the other person feel? _____
4. What are three potential agreements that might resolve the conflict and reestablish a good relationship between the two of you?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
5. What are three things you might try if this happens again?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
6. Is there anything you would like to say to the person you have the conflict with?

(Johnson, 2004)

After the initial form was completed by the students, they were brought together by the teacher (filling the role as mediator for this study) for discussion and resolution. A second form was filled out by the mediator to document the decided steps toward resolution.

Mediation Report Form

Date: _____ Mediators: _____
 Grade: _____ Teacher: _____ Subject Area: _____

People Involved In Conflict:

_____	___ Grade	___ Male	___ Female
_____	___ Grade	___ Male	___ Female
_____	___ Grade	___ Male	___ Female
_____	___ Grade	___ Male	___ Female

What Was The Conflict: _____

Where Did The Conflict Take Place: _____

Was An Agreement Reached? ___ Yes ___ No

Person 1 Agrees To: _____ Person Two Agrees To: _____

Signature: _____ Signature: _____

Follow-Up: _____

(Johnson, 2004)

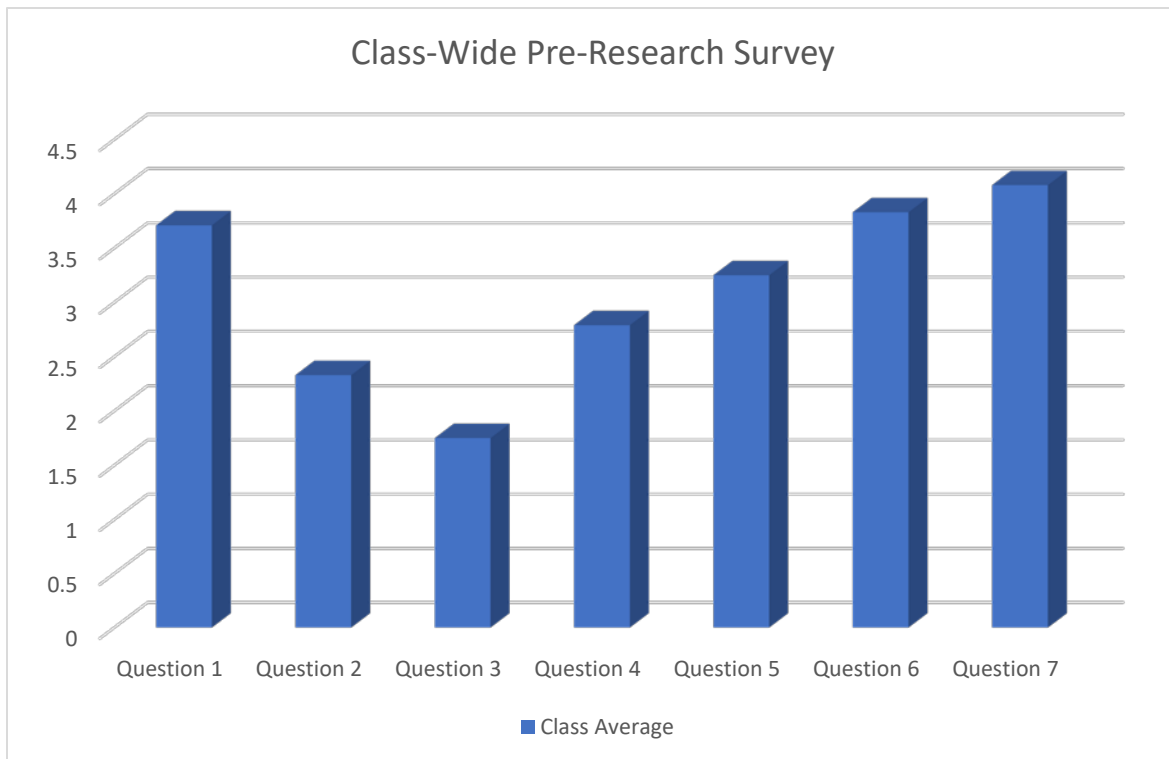
Procedure

Data and Observations Prior to Peer Mediation Implementation

Prior to implementing peer mediation, I made several observations of students' behavior patterns when it came to resolving conflicts with peers. Observing specifically for conflict and resolution for three weeks, I made note of seven separate conflicts that required adult intervention, five of which resulted in documentation of physical aggression. In each instance, the adult involved attempted to determine what caused the conflict and then work together to find a solution to ensure the conflict would not be repeated. One specific student (Student A) was involved in four of the instances of conflict and another student (Student B) was involved in three (two of these instances occurred with one another). I chose to collect additional data for

these two students as case studies during the research project. It was my observation that none of these seven instances were attempted to be reconciled by students without adult intervention.

Identical surveys were given before and after the action research project was implemented into the classroom. Each participant was asked the seven questions in an *always, sometimes, never* format, which were rated on a scale from one to five. Surveys were confidential, and the responses to each question were recorded. Pre-survey results are as follows:



Survey Questions:

1. How well do you get along with your classmates?
2. How often do you have disagreements or problems with your classmates?
3. Do you ever dislike coming to school because of problems with your classmates?
4. How likely are you to ask adults for help when you have problems with classmates?
5. How likely are you to try to solve problems with classmates together?

6. When you have problems with classmates, are you able to share your side of the story?
7. When you have problems with classmates, do you respectfully listen to their side of the story?

Results

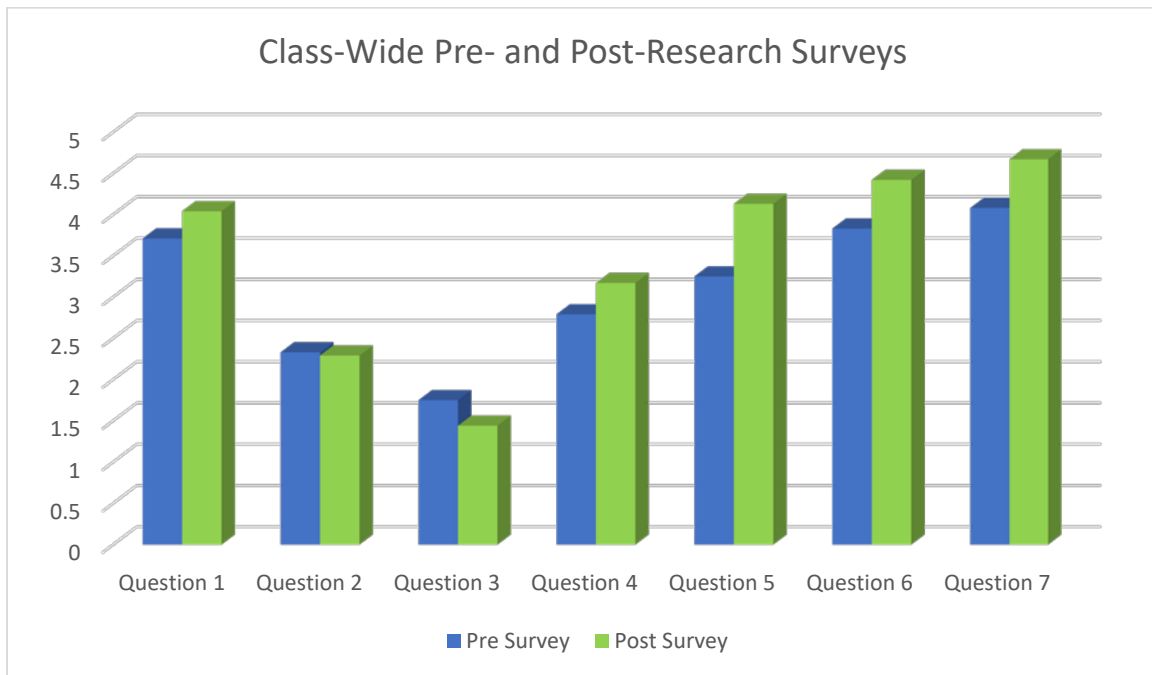
Data and Observations at the Conclusion of Research.

Throughout the six-week action research period, there were nine conflicts that utilized peer-mediated intervention. Of these conflicts, four involved Student A and three involved Student B, only one of which was with one another. Of the nine conflicts, only one required documentation for physical aggression. At first, students were reluctant to complete the conflict report forms, but each was filled out to completion. After the first week, students were more readily willing to complete the forms without additional prompting from an adult. Once the conflict report forms were completed, the students sat with their teacher, who served as mediator for this study, to fill out the mediation agreement form. Each of the nine conflicts reached an agreement to not only resolve the current conflict, but to help prevent future conflict as well.

It was observed that the several of the conflicts required an adult to suggest using the peer mediation process in order to resolve the issue. However, for three of the nine conflicts, one of the involved students suggested making use of the conflict forms to help with the resolution. Student A suggested using the forms for two of the four involved conflicts, and student B suggested using them once.

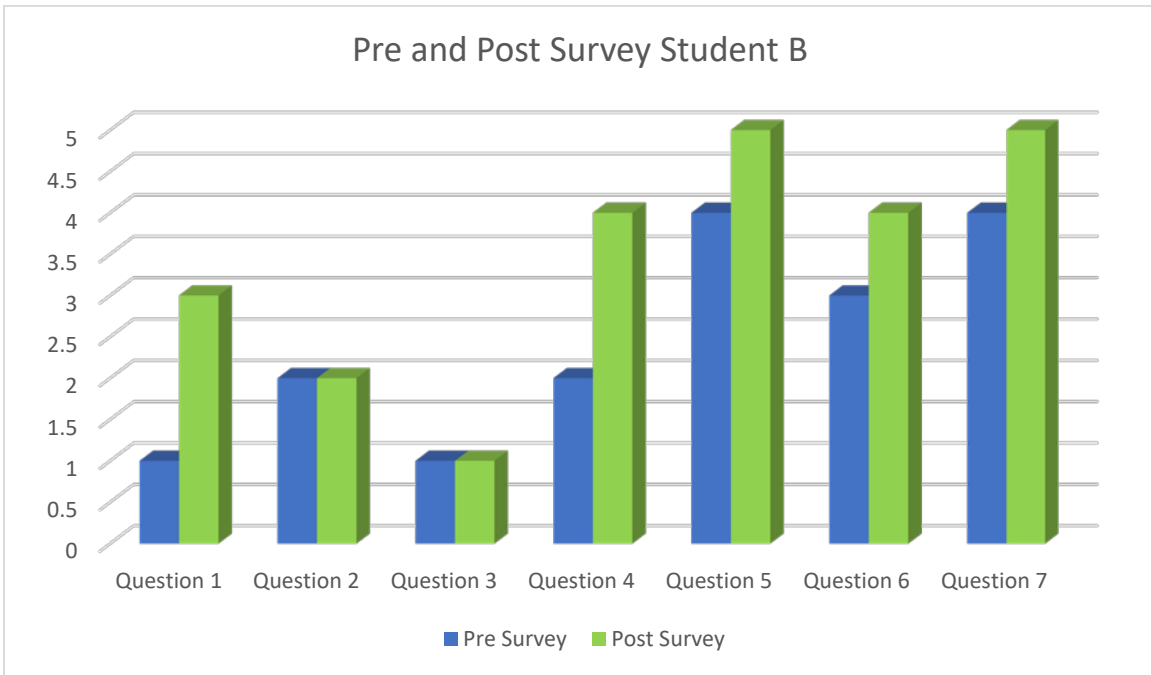
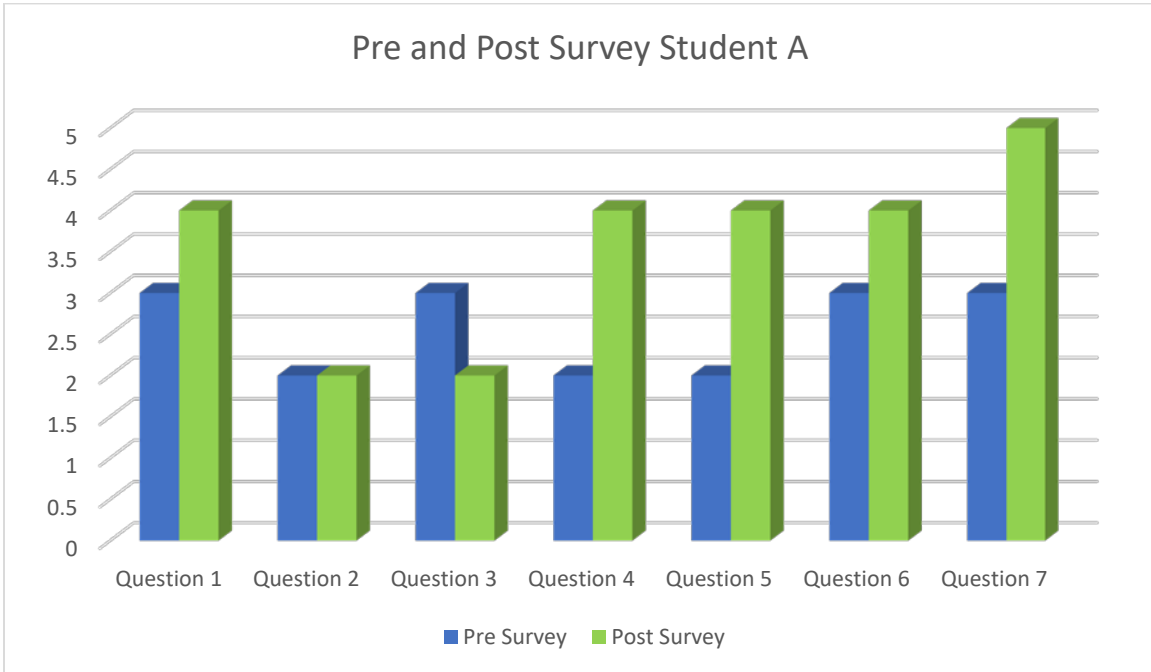
Post-research surveys were completed at the end of the six-week action research period. The confidential surveys asked the same seven questions as the pre-research surveys and were

weighted on the same scale. Student A and Student B completed both surveys, which were separated to measure their information individually.



Survey Questions:

1. How well do you get along with your classmates?
2. How often do you have disagreements or problems with your classmates?
3. Do you ever dislike coming to school because of problems with your classmates?
4. How likely are you to ask adults for help when you have problems with classmates?
5. How likely are you to try to solve problems with classmates together?
6. When you have problems with classmates, are you able to share your side of the story?
7. When you have problems with classmates, do you respectfully listen to their side of the story?



Data Analysis

According to pre- and post-research surveys, peer-mediated intervention has had an overall positive effect on peer interactions in the classroom.

Analysis by Survey Question

There was a 9% increase in student responses in regards to how well they get along with classmates. There was a slight (1.7%) decrease in response to how often students have disagreements with their classmates and a 17% decrease in students who dislike coming to school because of problems with classmates. There was a 13.6% increase in students' likelihood to ask adults for help when having problems with classmates as well as a 27% increase in students' likelihood of trying to solve problems with classmates together. Student surveys also showed a 15.4% increase in those who feel they are able to share their side of the story within a conflict and a 14.5% increase in those who listen respectfully to each other's side of the story. Student A and Student B had noticeably improved scores in all areas of the survey, with the exception of how well they get along with classmates. While these two students both feel they experience the same amount of conflicts as before peer-mediated intervention, each shows improved scores for every other survey question. Survey responses indicate that as a whole, student interactions were positively affected by the implementation of peer-mediated intervention, especially when it comes to conflict resolution.

Analysis of Observations

Observations also showed a positive effect in the classroom. Overall, student conflicts felt less taxing on both students and adults in the classroom. With a well-defined procedure for dealing with conflicts, students and adults experienced less difficulty explaining, expanding, and reconciling the conflicts. Student A had typical conflicts with classmates, but the resolution of those conflicts was made easier with the peer-mediated intervention system. Student A was more

willing to hear the other side of the argument and negotiation was less strenuous than those conflicts that occurred before implementation. Student B was slower to react impulsively during this action research timeframe and was more inclined to question or seek intervention before lashing out verbally or physically.

Reflection and Future Action Plan

Peer-mediated intervention has made a noticeable (positive) change in the classroom environment when it comes to managing peer-to-peer conflict. I expected to see some positive result from this research, but the level of influence peer mediation has had on the classroom was beyond expectations. Not only has the overall classroom attitude and approach to conflict-resolution improved, but there has been a clear positive impact on specific students who have a higher frequency of conflicts than their peers.

I plan to continue to incorporate peer-mediated intervention into the classroom. I have begun to lay out a plan to train students to manage the mediation process as peer mediators. Once I have established a method of selecting and training peer mediators, I plan to present my plan and findings to my fellow staff to see if school-wide implementation may be possible in the future. I believe a Montessori setting is an ideal location for peer-mediated intervention, as we are continuously working toward Peace Education are always striving to help students learn to do for themselves what others may have done for them in the past.

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