

Lowell Revitalization: One Student Conflict Manager at a Time

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Abstract

This article summarizes the initial, collaborative implementation efforts of a school-based conflict resolution program. Lowell elementary School is predominately Hispanic and located in one of the poorest areas of Fresno. The University's Kremen School of Education and Human Development partners with local educators to train children in grades four through six in conflict resolution and mediation skills. The Mediator Mentors project has demonstrated its replicability in over sixty schools. Process steps at Lowell School in conjunction with Fresno's Revitalization Project are enumerated and first results are identified.

Fresno has been listed as number one in the nation in concentrated poverty. The degree to which its poor are clustered in high-poverty neighborhoods is exemplified in Fresno's Lowell community. Lowell has suffered from neglect, which has led to blight. The immigrant population is high and the socioeconomic resources are low. This is the community where the City of Fresno and multiple community partners chose to make a difference.

We, in the *Mediator Mentors* project, represent one of those community partners: the local university, Fresno State. When the School of Education and Human Development was asked what we could do to help, we listened to what the members of the Lowell community liked 'best' and 'least' about their environment. 'Children and Diversity' were best and 'Crime and Gangs' were least. These important responses caught our attention immediately. Because of our long history of teaching and nurturing communication and conflict resolution skills in school children and university students, we raised our hands. Conflict Resolution Education is now taking place at Lowell Elementary School. A fledgling, mentored peer mediation program is taking wing—with the support of Lowell teachers and administrators, Fresno State professors and university students, and most importantly, Lowell Elementary School children. This is our story.

Background

Seventy percent of individuals living in the Lowell Elementary School community live below the poverty level and 70 percent of the languages spoken are other than English. The students at Lowell Elementary struggle to master concepts while they are struggling to master English. All children at the elementary school are on free or reduced lunch. On the school district website, the demographics are listed as follows: The total student population is 436, of which 388 are Hispanic or Latino and of those,

Figure 2. Nomination essay form.

Peer Mediator Nomination Form

I am a: (Circle one)

student teacher administrator counselor parent self-nominator

I am nominating _____ in grade _____

in _____'s classroom to become a mediator.

This is why I think s/he would be a good mediator: _____

Endorsements:

Staff _____

Staff _____

Student _____

Figure 3. Units of change.



Professor Teacher University Elementary School
Mentors Mentors Mentors Peer Mediators

The team was formed with attention to scaffolding communication skills and to providing attractive, competent models. University students were multi-ethnic and spoke three languages amongst them. Spanish-speaking and Asian Mentors appeared to develop rapport very readily with Lowell children.

The California State University, Fresno, personnel leading the Mediator Mentors project are active in the National Association for Conflict Resolution Association's

Education Section and are professors of education, as well as mediators. The university students are, for the most part, in training to become classroom teachers, school counselors or social workers. The mission of the Mediator Mentors project is to teach and nurture respectful conflict resolution skills in youth and in future helping professionals through direct instruction, guided practice, and cross-age mentoring relationships. The project vision is focused on supporting conflict resolution education at all levels for the purpose of effecting peaceful and productive problem-solving in our communities and world. During training of students, the goals and objectives of the program are discussed with the children—making them aware of their stake and share in the future. Training at the university also connects them to their potential and future opportunities. This discussion during mediation training is explicit, shared, and purposeful. We are all about the same business—making a more peaceful environment—in which conflict is handled constructively, rather than destructively.

Once the training was complete, the peer mediator students received orientation from their teachers as to shirts, clipboards, agreement forms, lunch periods, and responsibility. They received their certificates of training, were presented to the school, and were placed on the duty roster. On average, mediators served one recess every two weeks. Mentors visited with those mediators not on duty to facilitate ‘skill spots’ in order to keep new learning fresh. Children served in pairs to help facilitate resolution to naturally occurring disputes—except for those involving chronic bullying or physical altercations, which are always handled by adults. The majority of disputes resolved peacefully (five in the first month, ten in the second) were ‘friends problems’ and ‘sports disagreements.’ The average time it took to resolve a dispute was ten minutes. Confidentiality was preserved unless threat of danger to self or another was revealed during the mediation.

The program began in the Spring 2010 semester. The second round of nominations and training has just been completed (Fall 2010). Program usership and enthusiasm is up. A very important reason for this was the Teacher Leader initiative, in which class-to-class visits were made and mediation videos were shared, helping all students to understand that mediation is a positive choice for problem-solving. In the first month after training, the Lowell peer mediators have resolved twelve disputes peacefully. Teacher Leaders are beginning to ‘feel the rhythm’ of the program process with respect to school-wide program awareness, nomination, training, celebration, service, and data collection.

Research

Over the years Mediator Mentors has been working in schools, it has become apparent that the developmental benefits of program implementation are as important as are school climate effects. For example, in one case, Language Arts scores on standardized tests increased at a faster rate than before mediation implementation (Lane-Garon and Richardson 2003). In other instances (O’Farrell 2010; Cassinerio and Lane-Garon 2006), mediators had higher scores on empathy and perspective-taking measures than nonmediators, but nonmediator scores improved the most. To determine early effects

of program implementation at Lowell, the empathy and perspective-taking scales of the Interpersonal Reactive Inventory (Davis 1980) were administered, along with a scenario prompt involving a school conflict over limited resources (one computer, two students). The Davis scales were administered to students (and translated when necessary for individuals) before they became mediators and to all fourth and fifth graders (mediators and non; $N = 50$) after the peer mediation program was in place for several months. Results of the preliminary assessment follow. The Davis scales are included in the appendix of this paper with permission from Mark Davis, instrument designer. In this particular iteration, explanatory stories were added (Lane-Garon and Richardson 2003) to assist respondents with comprehension.

Preliminary Results

A repeated measures analysis of variance compared participant responses on the Davis scales (both mediators and non) to cognitive perspective-taking and empathy responses before mediation training and practice and after three months 'on the job.' The most notable instance of change was demonstrated in response to question one, "*Before criticizing someone, I think about how I would feel if I were in their place.*" The within-subjects contrast ($F = 26.615, p < .000$) and tests of between-subjects effects indicated that status as a mediator mattered with respect to the type of response given ($F = 169.407; p = 000$). There were significant interactions for mediator status with respect to all other questionnaire items, although no significant change over time was revealed. This is no doubt due to the short interval between assessments—three months. In other schools where the same measures were used, a significant effect for perspective-taking was revealed after one year of program implementation and empathy measures demonstrated an effect in year two. We are optimistic that with a longer assessment interval, similar, significant score increases on these measures will be generated. However, for now, we know that mediators are scoring somewhat higher than nonmediators on all items, although pre-to-post score increase is currently an elusive except in the case of item number one on the cognitive perspective-taking scale. That being said, *thinking about another's feelings before criticizing* is a great place to start with change!

More demonstrative of the conflict resolution education received by the mediators is their response on the problem-solving scenario, in which one child arrives at 'his computer' to find another student working there. The assessment required students to propose a solution to the problem. Lowell students took the assessment seriously and proposed creative solutions based on their knowledge of constructive conflict resolution. It was obvious to scorers that mediators (as opposed to nonmediators) frequently asked the other student, "*Why do you need the computer now?*" "*What is your assignment?*" "*When is it due?*" These questions are at the heart of interest-based negotiation as contrasted with positional bargaining ("*I got here first*"). This is one of the important lessons mediators learn in training. And even after three months of training and service, this seems to be transforming thinking about conflict resolution in a constructive way.

Initial assessments, therefore, are encouraging. Another important statistic that may point to program effects is the number of referrals to discipline before peer mediation program implementation as contrasted with current numbers. It can be seen that the principal's strategies for school climate improvement were already producing effects. Peer mediation may have contributed to the decline of those numbers; however, when so many school climate improvement projects are working together, it is difficult to tease out the effects of one. Nonetheless, a convergence of these is absolutely what we want to enhance the learning climate.

Date	Number of Discipline Referrals
April 2009	43
May 2009	31
April 2010 (Program begins in March)	28
May 2010	17

Conclusion

Our Lowell community story is far from over; we are collecting data with respect to this year's cohort of mediators and new Mediator Mentors are at the site. Lowell peer mediators have starred in a Mediator Celebration video and have attended Mediator Appreciation Day at Fresno State. These occasions add to student motivation and program visibility. Current challenges to program stability and further development are constituted by staff changes. One of the two Teacher Leaders is being reassigned and this will certainly affect the program's development. We hope that the university and the Lowell principal can encourage other staff members to engage with the program and become champions of this valuable resource for language development, leadership and school climate improvement. Anecdotal comments from partners are also included in the appendix of this document.

Appendix A: Measurement Description

The Davis Scales of the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* have been used in previous studies of mediation and social skills training interventions (Davis 1980; Lane-Garon 1998). On this questionnaire respondents circled the numbers from 1 to 7 (*never to always*) to indicate self-perceptions of their dispositional perspective taking. For example, item 4 on the cognitive scale reads, "*I believe there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.*" A rating of 7 would indicate a strong dispositional tendency to consider differing perspectives. Item 3 on the affective scale reads, "*Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.*" A rating of 7 of this reverse-scored item would indicate a low level of empathy or affective perspective taking. Davis reported Cronbach internal reliability alpha coefficients of .75 for males and .78 for females on the cognitive scale and .72 for males and .70 for females on the affective scale.

7. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "Put myself in his shoes"

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

never

always

WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY, DO YOU TYPICALLY TRY TO THINK ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON'S THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS? IF YOU USUALLY DO, CIRCLE A HIGH NUMBER. IF YOU SOMETIMES DO, CIRCLE A MIDDLE NUMBER. IF YOU RARELY THINK ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON'S FEELINGS WHEN YOU ARE UPSET, CIRCLE A LOW NUMBER.

Empathy Scale

Affective Perspective Taking Scale

(Davis subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index)

[WITH EXPLANATORY STORIES]

ADMINISTRATOR COMMENTS: THIS TEST HAS NO "RIGHT" ANSWERS. ITS PURPOSE IS TO DETERMINE YOUR TYPICAL OR USUAL DISPOSITION IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS. CIRCLE THE NUMBER FOR EACH STATEMENT THAT DESCRIBES YOUR TYPICAL WAY. RAISE YOUR HAND IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS. LISTEN, THEN CIRCLE, THEN WAIT FOR ME TO READ THE NEXT STATEMENT ALOUD.

Directions: Circle the number for each statement which best describes your typical way.

1. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective of them.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

never

always

Here's an example to make the meaning of the statement clearer:

IMAGINE YOU SEE A SMALL CHILD ON THE PLAYGROUND BEING BULLIED BY A BIGGER STUDENT. IF YOU USUALLY FEEL LIKE PROTECTING THE SMALL STUDENT, CIRCLE A HIGH NUMBER. IF YOU SOMETIMES DO, CIRCLE A MIDDLE NUMBER. IF YOU RARELY FEEL THIS WAY, CIRCLE A LOW NUMBER.

2. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

never

always

IMAGINE THAT A STUDENT HAS BEEN CALLED TO THE OFFICE FOR DISCIPLINE REFERRAL. YOU BELIEVE OTHERS WERE INVOLVED IN THE PROBLEM, TOO. IF YOU USUALLY WOULDN'T FEEL SORRY FOR THE STUDENT IN THE VICE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE, CIRCLE A HIGH NUMBER. IF YOU SOMETIMES WOULD, CIRCLE A MIDDLE NUMBER. IF YOU USUALLY FEEL BADLY FOR THOSE REFERRED TO THE VICE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE FOR DISCIPLINE, CIRCLE A LOW NUMBER.

THAT YOU SEE IN REAL LIFE, ON TV, AND READ IN BOOKS, CIRCLE A HIGH NUMBER. IF YOU SOMETIMES DO, CIRCLE A MIDDLE NUMBER. IF YOU RARELY HAVE THESE FEELINGS, CIRCLE A LOW NUMBER.

Scoring Note:

Cognitive Scale Reverse Scored Questions are # 2 and #5.

Affective (Empathy) Scale Reverse Scored Questions are # 2, #5, and #6.

Appendix C: Anecdotal Comments from Program Participants

“Lowell students were visited by Elaine Robles-McGraw and her assistant, City of Fresno Neighborhood Revitalization planner, at our Day Two of training this fall. The students were asked to describe their role as peer mediators to Elaine. Students were clear in articulating their mission to provide a service to their classmates, helping them when they are having a difficult time. They described that they are helpers and not the judge or the boss. They said they will help students tell what is happening when they are having a fight with someone and listen to the other side of the story. They children spoke with clarity and conviction!”

—Karen DeVoogd, Mediator Mentor Project Coordinator

“The students on duty Friday were Abraham, Roberto, Marisela, and Hector. They’re really focused! They are on the ball ready to work!”

—Adrian Cardenas, Mediator Mentor Fall 2010

“Our Lowell peer mediators are very representative of the Lowell student body. They show great spunk, sense of purpose, and belief that they can and will make a difference at their school.”

—Kristie Ross, Mediator Mentor and Project Liaison

“Lowell children seem to have a fragile sense of their significance. Participation as a peer mediator appears to strengthen this understanding of the importance of their contribution to their school community and to the future.”

—Pam Lane-Garon, Mediator Mentors Project Director

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Author Information

Dr. Lane-Garon’s research and scholarship is focused on social-cognitive development of students and on programmatic ways in which perspective-taking can be fostered. She has examined this developmental phenomenon in the context of co-developing peer mediation programs. Dr. Lane-Garon is a mediator and trains teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school professionals in mediation. Her project, *Mediator Mentors*, has resulted in conflict education programs in sixty public schools. She is associate director of *The Bonner Center for Character Education*, chair-elect of the *National Association for Conflict Resolution’s Education Section*, and teaches in the credential, masters, and doctoral programs at Fresno State.

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