



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT VIA SYSTEMICALLY PLANNED PEER MEDIATION

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Abstract:

Conflicts and confrontations between students are a key-feature of school life. Especially in recent years, both the scientific and the educational community are particularly sensitive to bullying issues in the school context. Peer mediation (or school mediation) is an alternative way to manage conflicts at school. A critical evaluation of this practice is attempted, as well as its contribution to the formation of a positive attitude in school and to the decreasing of school-bullying incidents. For this purpose, school extracurricular programmes can be planned. The application of relevant programmes at school can be facilitated by systemic modelling that may provide a useful conceptual tool for organizing similar interventions. The overall approach is exemplified by the implementation of Health Education programmes, as they are conducted at the Greek secondary education in the context of educational counselling psychology interventions.

Keywords: peer mediation, school mediation, conflict management, school bullying, systemic modelling

1. Introduction

In the last decade, a large number of studies have dealt with the phenomenon of school bullying. Although there is not a general theory to explain bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009), most studies emphasize the existence of predatory or intentional behaviour that occurs repeatedly for some time and characterized by imbalance of power or by asymmetrical power relationship (Olweus, 1997). Meanwhile, as a large number of educationalists believe, these conflicts have only negative effects, i.e., the existence of

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violence (Cremin, 2007). However, conflicts and confrontations between students are observed historically in every educational system (Galanaki, 2010; Panousis, 2010), as they are inherent in the everyday life of school and their management is a part of the cognitive development of students. In other words, they are a necessary feature of human societies that may also have positive effects (Cremin, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). This is indicated by the large number of theoretical approaches, as well (Davies, 2004). Within this framework, intervention programmes are successfully implemented that suggest the involvement of all members of the school community and actions taken at school, class and individual level (Rigby, 2012; Limber, 2011; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Olweus, 2009; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003).

In the Greek educational system, the most suitable institution for intervention actions against school-bullying and for conflict management is the Health Education programmes (Karakiozis et al., 2015a,b), dating since 1992 (Υ.Α. Γ2/4867/28-8-1992, Government Gazette 629, vol. B / 23-10-1992). Since 2000, they constitute an important category of the extra-curricular educational activities that are voluntarily implemented by pupils and teachers. Their purpose is to protect, improve and promote the physical, mental and social health of pupils, by developing their critical abilities and the associated skills and by attempting to upgrade their immediate social and natural environment (Karakiozis & Papapanousi, 2015a). Thus, part of the Health Education programmes and activities is the improvement of mental health of pupils. This particular group of activities includes the educational counselling psychology interventions that is a duty assigned to the Supervisors of Youth Counselling Stations (YCS), the only counselling psychology agency of the local (county) Secondary Education Directorates of Greece. Their duties will be described in the following section.

2. Youth Counselling Stations

According to the official documents of the Greek Ministry of Education (93008 / Γ / 10-08-2012, Government Gazette 2315 / 2012), the major educational duties of the Supervisors of YCSs are the following:

- They have the task of covering the psychosocial needs of local (county) schools, with the detection, diagnosis, brief psychological intervention and referral of students in particular need for psychological treatment.
- They provide parental counselling, exert preventive intervention within family support frameworks and also mobilize other social actors through school.
- They can participate in pedagogical meetings of the teachers' councils of county schools for specialized subjects related to applied Health Education programmes.

- They provide information for teachers on specific problems that can be faced by students, at the invitation of school directors or at the request of the local associations of parents.
- They sensitize the wider community about health and mental health education issues, by organizing and coordinating speeches, discussions and other activities.
- They monitor and support the mental health programmes of schools in the area of their jurisdiction (local Secondary Education Directorate), in cooperation with the regional Health Education Supervisors.
- They organize meetings for groups of teachers to help them solve educational, organizational and other issues and support their efforts.
- They cooperate with Health Education Supervisors to promote in every way the curricula of schools, the training seminars for teachers as well as local and international partnerships.
- They may be involved in coordinating the thematic network groups, in organizational committees of seminars and conferences and present suggestions related to their content.

These tasks are assigned to a single person (the Supervisor of YCS), who has a huge educational area of jurisdiction. A typical example is the area of the West Attica Secondary Education Directorate, consisting of 50 schools with 10,000 attending pupils. To cope with the counselling psychology needs of such magnitude, a feasible tactic is the decentralization of counselling services through the implementation of extracurricular programmes and, in particular, of peer (school) mediation programmes that deal with conflict management. In addition, the notion of implementing mediation practices as a method of conflict management has been already suggested: “... *peer mediation training suggested (between others) as a crisis prevention and response preparedness practices in which school counsellors should engage ...*” (ASCA, 2015), being recognized as an activity within the context of (educational) counselling psychology services (Hee-sook Choi et al., 2008; Joynt, 2004; Messing, 1993; Shannon, 2008).

In Greece, school mediation programmes are implemented in a limited number of primary and secondary education schools as extracurricular programmes (Health Education programmes focusing on mental health). In public education, extracurricular programmes are classified in five topics: Health Education, Cultural Affairs, Environmental Education, Career Education and eTwinning / Erasmus+ programmes, implemented by teachers during school hours for primary education schools and beyond school hours for secondary education schools. Each extracurricular programme can be coordinated by one teacher, who can be supported by up to three more colleagues (assistants) depending on the size of the pupils' group. It is implemented for two hours per week with the approval of the teachers' council of the school and the local Extracurricular Programmes Committee. Each topic is monitored by the respective local Supervisor, who is usually an experienced teacher having postgraduate education

/ training in the relevant topic. Finally, school mediation has been recently identified in the findings of the national dialogue for education as a structured process that has tangible results in reducing violence at schools, because it gives the students the ability to openly discuss their concerns, express their feelings, their needs and to explore together how to solve their problems without being criticized by the mediators (Porismata Dialogou, 2016: 97).

3. Theoretical Framework

Summarizing the work of Isenhart and Spangle, Davies (2004) lists a series of theoretical approaches where the notion of conflict is central. Some examples include:

- *Attribute Theory*: people conflict with, because they simplistically attribute to others properties and labels, often by describing positively their own actions and negatively the actions of others.
- *Equity Theory*: people conflict with, when they feel that they do not receive whatever they consider proper, and the resolution comes through remedial justice.
- *Field Theory*: people's actions are a product of forces that are applied and based on expectations, commitments and mutual trust between them.
- *Interaction Theory*: a conflict is the product of a continuous negotiation, depending on the value-framework and how people interpret behaviours and various events.
- *Psychodynamic Theory*: people deal with many unconscious situations such as stress, fear, aggression or guilt. To overcome these internal tensions, they use defence mechanisms of the ego such as "the displacement", e.g., when directing their anger towards another more accessible target.
- *Social Exchange Theory*: people's selection is based on their personal interests and on terms of needs and market conditions (cost-benefit).
- *Systems Theory*: conflicts arise when imbalances are created, either because people do not fulfil their operational roles or when a sub-system collapses.
- *Transformational Theory*: the conflict is not necessarily dysfunctional but has a vital social function, since tensions are released. Thus, the standards are redefined and people are involved with the deeper causes of the problems.
- *Conflict Strategies theory*: according to Johnson & Johnson (1996), each person chooses certain strategies to solve a conflict, taking into account: (i) the need to achieve targets and (ii) the need to maintain a relationship.

Summarizing the above references, a conflict is neither good nor bad, neither constructive nor destructive, but depends on the ways in which it is processed (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In this context, the concepts of cooperation and competition emerge and the conflict is perceived as a mutual problem that will be resolved through a

collaborative process (Cremin, 2007). Mediation, and peer mediation in particular, is such a method of resolving conflicts that will be presented next.

4. The Method of Mediation

Mediation etymologically means that someone is between two parties. It refers to the process whereby a third party, acting impartially, helps two (or more) parties that are in conflict to work for resolving the conflict and decide the terms of the agreement. It should firstly be made clear that *mediation* is an alternative method to resolve a conflict before the two parties reach litigation. Other alternatives are *arbitration*, *negotiation* and *conciliation* (Carneiro et al., 2014; Sandy, 2004). Those procedures refer to the process in which both parties are working together to resolve a conflict. They are distinguished by the degree of involvement of the third party to the decision-making and whether the followed procedure resembles a formal judicial process (Stitt, 2004; Liebmann, 2000).

According to Artinopoulou (2010), mediation aims at restoring, through structured processes, the relations between the two parties (*remedial justice*) and redefining them on a more qualitative basis. This process presupposes the orientation of all parties towards the future and not towards past behaviours. On the contrary, the negotiation is non-committing, collaborative and informal process through which the parties communicate with each other without the intervention of a third party (Carneiro et al., 2014). During conciliation on the other hand, a process similar to mediation, the two parties do not come into personal contact but only communicate through a third party, searching for consensus and concessions and not for maximizing mutual benefits (Carneiro et al., 2014). Also in arbitration, both parties usually participate mandatory (Carneiro et al., 2014; Rigby, 2012; Stitt, 2004) while the third party, which also operates impartially, after listening to both parties, suggests usually committing solutions for the resolution of conflict. Finally, the *dispute* relates to judicial resolution of a controversy (Stitt, 2004; Liebmann, 2000).

Mediation practices are used successfully to resolve conflicts in different fields of social life: family, workplaces, businesses, primary and secondary education schools, community, medical issues, conflicts between farmers, in civilian courts and finally solving major issues (Cremin, 2007; Stitt, 2004; Liebmann, 2000). In the legal field, according to the European Directive 2011/0275 (COM), Article 11 established standards for mediation and remedial justice services, in order to protect the victim from intimidation or further victimization. In the Greek legal system, the mediation process has been recently introduced to resolve civil and commercial matters (Law 3898/2010, Government Gazette 211, vol. A, 16/12/2010, Mediation in civil and commercial matters pursuant to Directive 2008/52/EC).

4.1. Peer Mediation: Definition and Context

According to Artinopoulou (2010: 144), *peer mediation* (or *school mediation*) is defined as the process of peaceful resolution of conflict in the context of school life, between two or more dissident students with the help of a third and neutral pupil - the *mediator* - through a structured process with clear boundaries, active participation and direct communication between the parties, aiming at a constructive resolution of the dispute. In other words, the Child's Advocate (2013) emphasizes the peaceful resolution of conflicts, bickering and tension among students with the assistance of trained teachers and student-mediators, where the involved persons are trying to understand each other with the goal of reaching an agreement to avoid repeating future relevant behaviours.

Peer mediation is a successful form of intervention (Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007) in primary and secondary education schools, aiming at a peaceful resolution of interpersonal conflicts. Implemented initially as a reaction to traditional/authoritarian forms of intervention (Rigby, 2012), it works alternatively to a traditional disciplinary-punishment system (Artinopoulou, 2010). The peer mediation programmes also contribute to the creation of a friendly school environment for students, improving the interpersonal relationships among them and reducing school violence and bullying incidents, especially when integrated into a comprehensive prevention plan (Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007). Peer mediation programmes were originally implemented in the United States during the 1960s and nowadays in a number of countries, including Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Greece, Latvia etc. (European Anti-Bullying Network, 2014; Rigby, 2012).

4.2. Peer Mediation Features

It has been attempted in various ways to classify peer mediation programmes. Initially, there is a distinction among those selecting a limited number of students (Carde model) and those that all students of a class or school participate in (Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In the first case, the mediator-role can only be assumed by those students that have attended the relevant training programme, while in the second case, the total of students are trained in conflict management. In practice there is also a combination of the above models. Another distinction of intervention programmes is that of Levy & Maxwell (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), who distinguish these that are embedded in the curriculum, which are mainly of preventive nature, and those that deal exclusively with peer mediation in practice. Finally, according to Opatow (1991), the peer mediation programmes and conflict resolution are divided into: skills programmes (interpersonal and group relations, conflict resolution skills), academic-type programmes (cognitive conflict management procedures) and programmes that emphasize the need for structural change of schools.

Although there are many variations of peer mediation, most studies (Centre for European Constitutional Law, 2015; IREX & FTI, 2013; Artinopoulou, 2010; Cremin,

2007; Haynes et al., 2004; Orme-Johnson & Cason-Snow, 2002; Bitel & Rolls, 2000) agree that in a mediation meeting the next steps are followed:

1. Agreement to conduct the mediation meeting.
2. Welcome and recommendations. The mediators welcome their peers involved in mediation and make the necessary recommendations. They indicate the rules governing the procedure (impartiality and confidentiality) and the confidentiality exceptions according to school policy (e.g., cases of criminal behaviour, abuse or threats of abuse).
3. Both parties present their story; there is a paraphrase and summary of the different opinions by the mediators. Wherever a party does not understand or reject the procedure, the head of the programme is informed to resolve the dispute, otherwise the process ends.
4. Emphasis is put on the emotions, interests and needs of both parties and whatever was said is confirmed through feedback.
5. Solutions are proposed by both parties that will meet their interests and needs.
6. Evaluation of proposals.
7. Agreement between the two parties that is recorded. It is expected that both parties will meet again with the mediators after one week to confirm whether the agreement was kept. To the school administration or others, only the result of the process is notified and not the content of it, unless agreed by both parties.

These steps are also applied when mediation takes place between adults, with the participation of lawyers-mediators (Stitt, 2004). Factors affecting the successful outcome of a mediation, according to Rigby (2012), are: the quality of training (content, time of training and skills that will be acquired by the trainees) and the school climate, which affects the degree of readiness of students and their ability to develop the relevant skills.

In summary, the key-features that govern peer mediation (European Constitutional Law Centre, 2015; Artinopoulou, 2010; Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007) are:

- a) The voluntary participation of all those involved, without allowed interventions by third parties, even with the purpose of enforcing the agreement.
- b) The impartiality, objectivity and neutrality of mediators.
- c) The mediators should avoid cases with conflicts of interest.
- d) Whatever is said, done or recorded during the mediation process is considered confidential, besides exceptions related to school policy.
- e) The mediators must be properly trained and educated.
- f) The mediators undertake to promote the mediation programme to their peers without unnecessary promises or disclosure of information concerning the course of a mediation process.
- g) There is a mutual respect between the mediators and the mediated parties.

- h) The mediators work together for the better resolution of the conflict and they respect any different approaches that may exist regarding the handling of mediation.

In particular, the training of students in a mediation programme includes four thematic areas: conflict management, communication, the process of mediation and programme's policy; while a variety of teaching methods are used: experiential learning, work assumptions, role plays, presentations and written exercises (Centre for European Constitutional Law, 2015; IREX & FTI, 2013; Artinopoulou, 2010; Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007; Cremin, 2007; Haynes et al., 2004; Ohio Department of Education, 2002; Orme-Johnson & Cason-Snow, 2002; Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Fairfax County Public Schools, n.d.).

5. Results

In this work, we try to define a theoretical framework that will assist to critically evaluate peer mediation as an alternative to conflict management at school. According to the literature and despite some criticism, the success of these programmes is factual for the attending students, because they contribute to their emotional development. Moreover, changes in attitudes and behaviours of students in school bullying issues are observed when such programmes are incorporated in the school curriculum and become part of the school culture, having the support of all members of the school community. It should be noted that peer mediation is a dynamic process where new practices can be adopted in order to manage a conflict better. In this respect, the contribution of holistic approaches is stressed (Karakiozis & Papapanousi, 2015b), while the systemic school-based interventions in various aspects and forms of counselling are also recognized as an important educational activity (Kourkoutas & Giovazolias, 2015).

5.1. Planning a Peer Mediation Programme

In the absence of a unified theoretical framework for school bullying, the educational authorities that could be interested in organizing a peer mediation programme would have to improvise in creating relevant guidelines. In this respect, systemic thinking/modelling has provided a useful conceptual tool for organizing such interventions, in some schools of the educational region of the Western Attica Secondary Education Directorate, implemented as Health Education programmes. By the term *systemic modelling* we do not necessarily refer to the application of Systems Theory in conflict management (see section: 3. *Theoretical Framework*) but to the usage of this theory in organizing a respective programme.

Systems Theory is the interdisciplinary study and description of *systems* as an abstract organization of phenomena, independently of their nature or scale of existence. The study focuses on the common principles of complex entities, and the mathematical

models of description (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992). A system is described as a complex set of components that have interacting properties, relationships and processes, within the system and with its environment. Originally, the study of systems is conventionally attributed to Wiener (1948) and Von Bertalanffy (e.g., see: Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Especially social systems, as the mentioned herein, are self-regulating and adaptive that learn from experience and change their behaviour through feedback. The study of social systems, as a sociological paradigm, is influenced by the works of Parsons (1977) and Luhmann (1995). The application of Systems Theory is very useful for the study of social (human activity) systems, because "... *social and psychological phenomena tend to resist quantitative modelling by posing basic difficulties already on the plane of boundary identification ...*" (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998).

Systemic modelling offers a variety of conceptual tools, such as the *cognitive maps*. The cognitive map of a person is a conceptual representation of his/her environment (Laszlo et al., 1993). These notions are very useful for those educators that would eventually decide to organize a peer mediation programme, by forming a cognitive map of the required procedures as perceived by him/her. For the purpose of facilitating their efforts, a general systemic model that is called Organizational Method for Analysing Systems (OMAS) is presented and suggested below.

5.2. Systemic Modelling for Peer Mediation

The systemic model of OMAS (Papakitsos, 2010) originates from two similar techniques of Information Systems: the Structure Analysis and Design Technique (SADT, see: Ross, 1977; Pressman, 1987: 192-196) and the Integration Definition for Function Modelling series of models (IDEF_x, see: Grover and Kettinger, 2000). These models/techniques are compatible to the *General Systems Model* (GSM, see: Sanders, 1991) that describes any system in terms of the Input-Process-Output-Feedback quadruple concepts. The former is a standard technique of developing Information Systems, while the latter has been used in governmental agencies and private commercial and industrial enterprises for many years to conduct activities, such as system control, engineering and reengineering, data flow and others. The evolution of OMAS aimed at increasing the communicational aspects of the two previous models, in order to become compatible to similar models of perceiving human communication (Mantoglou, 2007; Lasswell, 1991). The latest version of OMAS-III has been used in a variety of social systems applications, such as: curricula designing for vocational guidance projects (Papakitsos et al., 2015), language teaching (Makrygiannis & Papakitsos, 2015), public administration (Papakitsos, 2015), martial arts training (Papakitsos and Katsigiannis, 2015) and project planning (Papakitsos, 2013a).

According to OMAS-III (Papakitsos, 2013a,b), the seven *journalists questions* determine the features of a system. This notion will be exemplified in organizing a peer mediation programme at school, perceived as a social system in accordance to GSM.

The relevant setting-up is arranged in two phases: the preparation and the implementation one. The presentation initiates with the latter:

- *Quantitative data* (Input): the conflicting parties along with their status, attitudes, personalities, emotions, interests, needs or expectations.
- *Why* (Cause/Purpose): the reasons of conflict and the purpose of the remedial activity within the school context.
- *Who* (Monitor): the head-teacher of the programme and the mediators.
- *How* (Rules): the rules governing the procedure, as indicated previously (2, a-h).
- *Where* (Place): the place of mediation meetings.
- *When* (Time): the time of mediation meetings and activities, within the schedule of the school's work-hours.
- *What* (Output): the agreement between the two parties and the Feedback operation, which is expressed as the subsequent meetings (7), the observed benefits to the school community and any corrective activities required.

Since the application of OMAS-III can be recursive in dealing with the subsequent levels of a problem, the preparation phase that precedes can be designed accordingly:

- *Quantitative data* (Input): the candidate mediators along with their status, attitudes, personalities, emotions, interests, needs or expectations.
- *Why* (Purpose): the purpose of the remedial activity within the school policy.
- *Who* (Monitor): the selected head-teacher of the programme.
- *How* (Rules): the training curriculum and the accompanying regulations.
- *Where* (Place): the place of peer mediation training.
- *When* (Time): the time of peer mediation training and activities, within the schedule of the school's work-hours.
- *What* (Output): the well trained and educated mediators and the establishment of the local school's facility/regulations for conflict resolution.

Obviously, there is no apparent limitation in the application of the afore-mentioned methodology to different situations. All the previously presented concepts in the respective sections concerning peer mediation, whether they regard the preferred theoretical framework, the models of peer mediation, the stages of mediation meeting or its features can fit somewhere within the particular systemic modelling.

6. Discussion & Conclusions

Proceeding to a critical assessment of peer mediation, we have already mentioned that peer mediation is only one alternative for conflict management within a school. Because of this, objections have been expressed to a series of issues, such as:

- the existence of a large imbalance of power, as in the cases of school bullying in a large scale that we have already mentioned before (Olweus, 2009), makes the mediation difficult since it is an obligation of the mediator to remain neutral

(Rigby, 2012; Panousis, 2010). Respectively, it is not considered an appropriate choice in cases of sexual harassment or when drugs/alcohol are used (Rigby, 2012);

- the voluntary nature of the process can generate participation problems, such as finding skilled mediators or allowing someone to avoid participating in a mediation (Rigby, 2012);
- finally, some studies observed methodological problems, e.g., the concepts of “conflict” or “bullying” are not always perceived in the same way (Johnson & Johnson, 1996) or the realization of the programme can be identical with the implementation of the survey (Rigby, 2012).

Yet, a large number of mediation programmes success is reflected in the literature (Centre for European Constitutional Law, 2015; Artinopoulou, 2010; Cremin, 2007; Haynes et al., 2004; Stitt, 2004; Liebmann, 2000; Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1996) and focuses mainly on:

- reducing conflict and bullying incidents (Noaks & Noaks, 2009; Flecknoe, 2005);
- developing social skills for students attending the programme (Noaks & Noaks, 2009; Flecknoe, 2005);
- improving the school climate (Noaks & Noaks, 2009. Flecknoe, 2005);
- the support by the school administration and the integration into the school curriculum (Flecknoe, 2005).

At the same time, a successful peer mediation programme requires a high level of training and support of the mediators (European Constitutional Law Centre, 2015; IREX & FTI, 2013; Rigby, 2012; Artinopoulou, 2010; Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007; Cremin, 2007; Haynes et al., 2004; Orme-Johnson & Cason-Snow, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). However, the absence of a uniform training programme, although enhancing the creativity of teachers, may hinder their work in the construction of the corresponding programme (Rigby, 2012). In addition, the absence of a theoretical framework, while limiting the comparability of mediation programmes (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), allows the integration of various practices, such as: circular remedial justice (Rigby, 2012; Restorative Justice Council, 2011), support/help from peers (Rigby, 2012), training in peace issues (IREX & FTI, 2013; Fountain, 1999) and active citizenship (Cremin, 2007). All the above aspects of peer mediation can be successfully managed according to the guidelines of systemic modelling techniques, which may open new avenues for peer mediation and conflict management in the school environment.

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