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Group Proposal

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Comprehensive Group Proposal
Background and History:

I was a 10th grade high school student when I got suspended. A fellow student decided that the best time to confront me about something she heard was while we were changing in the girls' locker room. Looking back, I remember the ambivalence and embarrassment I felt as I stood in my underwear, listening to her berate me with hurtful names and mock me while other girls stared, knowing that the rumors she heard were all false. My cheeks flushed a hot pink with my flustered attempt to interrupt and defend myself, and after she left, my tears that streamed made me feel anger, helplessness, and shame. A gym instructor got word of the three-minute verbal altercation, and both of us were called out of the next period and suspended for the next three days. The reason? Starting conflict at school and being unable to “control our anger.”

It's these instances where I reflect on how useful it would have been had I known about a skill known as Conflict Resolution (CR) as a student. CR is defined simply as: a way for two or more parties to find a peaceful solution to a disagreement among them (Wolff & Nagy, 2018). With properly applying CR in a situation, students can learn to become better communicators, relationship-builders, and problem-solvers. Resolving disputes can allow students to become empowered and reduce tensions and hostilities associated with conflict, while having a positive impact on their self-esteem (Kriedler et al., 1987).

Johnson and Johnson, in a 1991 study, asserts “the ability to effectively and peacefully handle conflict is not necessarily intuitive; rather, it is a learned skill” (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Both the female student and I avoided each other for the remainder of the school year, and along with that avoidance came feelings of resentment, low self-esteem, and awkward tension. Hypothetically speaking, how different could the outcomes have been for the both of us that day in the locker room if we learned to apply CR? Perhaps used an “I-Statement” to help with

communicating? Or kept our voices level with no interruptions, while avoiding judgements?

Even better, how different would the outcome would have been had we had the opportunity to learn about resolving conflict in school in the first place?

The need for conflict resolution education in school is critical and could do wonders for students. The purpose of this comprehensive group proposal will be to evaluate different benefits and outcomes of CR, the application and techniques of CR in a school setting, and a variety of group screening processes involving the implementation of conflict resolution education and/or CR programs at the school site. Before we begin, it is important to understand first, what type of conflicts take place in the school setting, and why students need to develop CR as a life skill.

Text from secondary school curriculum handbook emphasizes that the skills associated with resolving conflict are especially important for young people because they often feel powerless (Kriedler et al., 1987). Some background on peer conflicts and aggressive behaviors that take place at school highlight some reoccurring factors. These factors are: jealousy, exclusion from groups, violation of rules, difficult communication, stereotyping and the formation of cliques, and claims about opinions and beliefs (Sidorowicz, 2009). In the worst scenario, peer conflicts at school can also lead to aggression, negative effects on psychological wellness, school violence and suspensions/expulsion. Without peer mediation and CR as a skill, students can find themselves met with feelings of mistrust, tension, and unsatisfied relationships. With the implementation of a peer mediation/CR program at school, positive outcomes such as improved school climate, higher levels of self-esteem, empowerment, and increased efforts to resolve conflict collaboratively are seen (Cohen, 1995). In fact, “many of the factors that contribute to problems like substance abuse and teen pregnancy (low self-esteem, lack of decision-making skills, negative peer pressure) seem to be positively affected by peer mediation

programs” (Cohen, 1995). A literature review provides that conflict resolution training at school increased students’ knowledge of how to resolve conflicts in constructive ways. In the same study, it was concluded that CR and peer mediation training has been successful and the knowledge is relevant to using it as a life skill (Daunic 2000).

Conflicts can also become destructive “when they are denied, suppressed or avoided. If students do not have conflict management training, they will use their own techniques, which are often inadequate” (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). These techniques often lead to feelings of anger, verbal abuse and broken relationships and a decrease in learning efforts. (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). Further research provides that 70% of seventh- and eighth-grade Canadian students, after enrolled in a peer mediation program, demonstrated 100% mastery of the integrative negotiation procedure (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1995), and 76% of ninth-grade Canadian students demonstrated 100% mastery of the negotiation procedure (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Laginski, & O’Coin, 1995) (retrieved from (Daunic, 2000)).

Additionally, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is highlighted of importance when students are involved with interpersonal conflict. Maslow emphasizes that needs such as self-actualization, justice, self-esteem, love and belongingness etc., is the essence of human development (Cohen, 1995). A desire to meet these basic psychological needs is a motivational factor behind people’s behavior during interpersonal conflicts (Cohen, 1995). Because the purpose of this group proposal is intended for a high school demographic, the peer conflicts and activities for the group that we will evaluate will be focused mainly towards interpersonal conflicts that take place in the school setting.

Demographics and Screening:

The population I have chosen to target for a Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution group will be high school students grades 9 to 12 with disciplinary issues. Students in this group will have to be referred by either a school counselor, teacher, and even parent. Not every student who is suspended may be qualified to be a participant in the group. For example, a student who has been caught cheating or damaging school property does not necessarily mean they will need to enroll in the CR program. The students themselves will either have a reports or histories of displaying aggressive or disruptive behaviors, use of offensive language, be involved with verbal and/or physical fights at school, bully others or are victims of being bullied, and have trouble managing their emotions. Referrals for this group may be made (with student consensus) as well, for students who may not have disciplinary issues but want to participate to learn peer mediation and conflict resolution as a skill. Recommendations can be made for individual students by teachers who believe that they see the group as beneficial for them based by personal observations of low self-esteem and lack of empathy. One way to increase participation in the ongoing of this group at school is to make the program available to students as an extra credit opportunity. The group will be promoted in the beginning and throughout the semester by all staff, along with promotional school material and handouts including digital emails that describe the purpose of the group for students and parents in the community.

A school counselor will be the group leader for this group. This counselor will also be involved with the screening and pretraining process for the group. After the selected student has been referred over to the counselor, the counselor will meet with the student individually in his or her office to go over the outcomes and expectations of the group. During the prescreening interview, the counselor will first ask that the student fill out a questionnaire that gauges any experience the student may have in mediation behaviors and conflict resolution. These questions

will be scored on a 1-4 scale (1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Always) and will include questions modeled like the following: “I try to meet people halfway,” “I prefer to compromise when solving problems,” “I avoid disclosing how I really feel to the other person in an argument to avoid negative outcomes,” “When I find myself in an argument, I usually interrupt others before they finish speaking.”

After the student has filled out the questionnaire, the counselor will go over the student’s score and explain the purpose of the group, its intended results, and clear expectations. During the screening process, the counselor is recommended to hold a confidential conversation with the student on why their repeated disciplinary reports has brought them to the referral of the CR group. These expectations will include that any missed absences or lack of participation in the group may lead to further disciplinary actions. Once screening is done, the student will then start attending group. As mentioned earlier, teachers will also be part of the screening process as they continue to evaluate and observe students in their class that may need to build self-esteem and peer mediation skills. There will be a total of eight sessions held throughout the semester, including summer and winter session. The minimum number of students in attendance will be 10, and the maximum at 25. Depending on the timing of when the student is enrolled in the group, they will need to make up for the allotted number of group sessions to fully engage and learn about conflict resolution/peer mediation.

Each group will run for a total of one hour and will be held after school on campus in a vacant classroom. The group will be held only once a week, for a total of eight sessions. Once the eighth session is over, the group will rerun again, in accordance to the active school year schedule.

Week 1 Group Session:

This first session of the conflict resolution/peer mediation group will be an introduction to the types of conflict that take place in school and understanding that not all conflicts are bad. The goal for group members will be to identify the five styles of conflict management presented and understanding the value of conflict. According to Thomas and Kilmann, these five styles are: 1) Accommodating 2) Avoiding 3) Collaborating 4) Competing 5) Compromising (Kilmann, 2019).

The session will go over the dimensions and behaviors associated with each conflict resolution style, as well as different sample situations presented to the group. The first activity used in this group session will be for each student to identify on paper which styles they see themselves using most often. The second activity used in this group will be interactive. The group leader, which is the school counselor in this case, will present sample scenarios to the class and call on members to answer on which style is identified. Because the group is still in its early stage of forming, icebreakers will be needed. One recommendation that I have to ease any tension within members is to play a game. Once the styles of conflict have been taught, the group leader will facilitate a beach ball activity. In this activity, every student will stand in a circle and toss a ball in the room. This activity has a will ask about a story of conflict, such as “How am I going to get past this X obstacle to reach Y?” Whichever color of the beach ball the student’s hands are placed on will be the question that the student has to answer. For example: A student lands on red – the scenario is the student feels like they are losing their patience when another student talks down to them. What style of conflict is best appropriate when used to confront them? This will help to jog the group member’s memory of the styles of conflict, and for the class to also see different scenarios presented and how every person’s answer may be different.

The activity is meant to build group cohesion, while giving every member a chance to create a voice. The following further elaborates on the importance of cohesion in group development:

Although group cohesion usually does not manifest fully until the norming (or identity) stage of the group, the seeds for its development are planted early. They are rooted in attachment, as members learn to trust and interpersonally relate (Gladding, 2016).

Week 2 Group Session:

This session will focus on the power of positive communication. During this session, the group leader will play different scenes of conflict from movies and hold group discussion on either how the conflict outcome can be destructive, what the best response may be, and how it can be avoided. The goal for members will be to learn the importance of non-defensive communication, and the formula for creating an I-statement. The group will learn about what an “I-Statement” is and how to create one. Each student will be asked to think of a disagreement or conflict they were in and form their own I-statements.

The group will learn to identify a “You” statement from an “I” statement and read over examples of both. Learning about how using defensive language instead of accusatory language will be the guide to creating the I-statement. Creating the I-statement is also beneficial to mindfulness and taking responsibility. Mahaima Gupta, a psychologist, shares the insight on how I-statements contribute to wellbeing:

When you focus on what you are feeling, rather than on your opinion on the matter (as is conveyed through a ‘You’ statement), it is non-threatening and inoffensive. Hence it doesn’t make the person jump to his defense with all shields up and instead allows him to drop his guard. So always identify and say what you are feeling about the situation, instead of what the other person is doing (Gupta, 2012).

The I-statement format will be as follows:

I feel... (state your emotion)
when... (describe the specific situation in a neutral and objective way)
because... (state the effect on your life)

and I want... (state the action you want taken) (The University of Iowa, 2019). To close the session, the group leader will ask members to partner up and share their statements with another member. If comfortable, the members will be asked to voluntarily share theirs or their team member's I-statement to the class.

Week 3 Group Session:

This group session will focus on listening skills. The goal of this group will be for members to learn tips for becoming a better listener, and how to apply those tips to real-life scenarios. The activities used for this week's group will include role plays in which students will be mediators and disputants. Students will act out case scenarios in front of the class and audience members will discuss what techniques were displayed and decide on the outcomes of the conflict.

The second activity will be a guided memory and discussion of students' experience on conflict. This activity is meant to create self-awareness of the student's listening skills. The group leader will ask students to relax and prepare to think back on the past week. They will be asked the following questions: "how often in the past week have you been in a conflict situation?" "Who/what was the subject of each conflict?" and "Did you tell the other person what you thought and how you felt?" "Do you remember what the other person said, and was it valid?" "What were the consequences?" "Did the conflict escalate or de-escalate?"

Week 4 Group Session:

This group session will focus on several mediation tactics: negotiation, compromise, forgiveness, staying present, and knowing when to let something go.

A brief literature review on teachers' perceptions about conflict resolution provide evidence that although teachers reported high levels of autonomy over classroom instructional issues, there was also extensive problems of cohesion, cooperation, and consensus (Ingersoll,

1996). As an effect, students sensed the staff's lack of commitment and felt that they were better able to resist or ignore rules, often resulting in conflict issues.

Communication is most effective when all parties are cooperative. A 2006 Johnson and Johnson study finds that individuals must grasp a sense of positive interdependence, interpersonal and small group skills (such as leadership, decision-making, communication, CR) to maintain effective working relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

The text states the following:

When students work together in cooperative groups to maximize their own and each other's learning, compared to working competitively or individualistically, their achievement tends to increase, their relationships tend to become more positive, their relationships tend to become more supportive, and their self-esteem tends to increase. These outcomes are interrelated, as the higher students achieve the more they like each other and the higher their self-esteem, while the more they like each other and the higher their self-esteem the harder they work to achieve (Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

The games used for this week's session will be a role-playing card game. Cards with six specific strategies will be pulled from students: denial, accommodation, confrontation, use of power, compromise, collaboration. After drawing cards out, groups of three to five students will create a role-play based on what they have learned about the strategies. The goal will be for students to grasp their knowledge on these strategies, and how to better implement them as part of their peer mediation skills.

The group leader will also ask students to create value statements. Some examples of these students could be "My family is the most important thing to me." "Alcohol should be illegal." For this activity, the group leader will have students line up under each value statement written and write "agree or disagree" on the blackboard. The rule for this activity is that no negative language or put-downs will be allowed. The purpose of the activity will be to show students that they can work on communicating positively and negotiating.

Week 5 Group Session:

This group session will focus on avoidance, confrontation, and problem-solving. The group leader will teach different examples of tips to deal with working on avoidance, confrontation, and problem-solving. The lesson will also include identifying nonverbal communication and cues to read reactions for better communication. The lesson will also include ways to use humor to deal with conflict. The class will look at basic kinds of conflict: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup. The group leader will ask students to describe and discuss examples of these conflicts they have seen in school, in their neighborhood or in the news. More role-playing activities will be done in this group. By this group, members should be already in the norming stage, if not close, and will feel more comfortable with each other, especially through role plays.

Another activity for this week will be a conflict resolution style worksheet. In the worksheet, the student will fill out three parts. The first section will ask the student what they do when they get angry. The second will be their response, "I respond by....," and then lastly, "When I want to make the situation better, I..." This activity is meant to jog the student's memory of CR techniques and build self-awareness. After the worksheet is completed, students will get into small groups or large groups and frame a discussion regarding their insights.

Week 6 Group Session:

This group session will be called "Keeping Your Cool." The focus of this session will be the roots of conflict, negative emotions, and sources of anger in school. The goal for students will be learning the difference between reacting versus responding, as well as learning some useful non-violent techniques for resolving conflicts. The goal is also to teach students how to

stay calm under pressure. This week, students will be paired up or broken off into small groups (depending on class size) and given a handout of a conflict case study. Using their knowledge, students will come up with the best approach to resolving conflict in their groups. The group leader will ask each group to share their brainstorm and answer.

Short clips from movies and/or other video content will be displayed, and students will play a game called “Name that conflict,” where they identify the conflicts they have learned and offer solutions.

In this session, the group leader will go over perceptions, stereotypes, suspicions and nonverbal cues that trigger conflict.

Week 7 Group Session:

The group will be given a homework assignment to write a 1,000-word essay of their takeaways from the group as well as how the way they communicate during interpersonal conflicts is important. Some guiding questions for the essay will be: “People like to talk to me because...In talking with people, I think I could improve on...” “How do you think others view you?” “What conflict style could I use?” To review, the group will be given a packet that goes over all topics covered. Members will be given a self-awareness activity titled “My Conflicts,” in which they will evaluate their own patterns of conflict.

During this group session, the goal will be for members to be knowledgeable on how to handle conflict before their last group session. The group leader will divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 (depending on size) and assign each group a scenario. The rest of the session time will be used for student groups to create a skit based on the scenario they have been given. Each skit should have an ending that corresponds to one of the conflict styles learned, such as

confrontation, problem solving, or avoidance. Students can go outside and practice these skills to be well prepared before next week's class.

Week 8 Group Session:

This will be the closing of the group session. All student groups will present their skits to the class and will be held in discussion comparing these CR styles used. The students will also be given a brief cumulative quiz to identify strategies and tips discussed, as well as the five styles of conflict management. During this session, group members will feel like they have gotten to know each other and will be more comfortable to share any personal stories of conflicts. Group discussion will be held on group members and their personal stories of conflict, and what they have learned. Each student will be asked to share one goal they have for the remainder of the school year and asked to evaluate their personal values and styles of communication that have improved or need improvement. Students will submit their 1,000-word essays as part of their successful completion of the program.

Group Termination & Implications:

In addition to any assignments, quizzes or essays submitted, students who have been referred to attend the group (mostly those with disciplinary behaviors) will be required to complete an exit interview with the counselor. In order for the group to run successfully, proper group leader training is necessary. Many factors for buy-in from school staff will need to be addressed, such as time conflicts, who can lead the group, and any budget issues. Several resistance factors are present. The first factor will be that the school counselor does not have time to run the group. An alternative solution will be that the group leader role can be rotated

between counselors and even a teacher. Teachers and other school staff who are interested in learning about CR are invited and urged to sit in on group meetings as a way to learn how to teach the material in their own classrooms.

The second resistance factor will be the effectiveness of the program. More evidence provides that implementing peer-mediation programs can be associated with fewer fights, fewer referrals to the office, and a decreased rate of school suspension (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Research from a literature review of “The Impact of Perceptions on Conflict Management,” provides that some teachers, like students, have negative perceptions of conflict. My critique of the literature is that the results of the research support the notion that perceptions of conflict are negative, and both teachers and students need conflict resolution/mediation training. The article emphasizes the importance of modeling necessary skills to students during conflicts including nonviolent methods. Although the authors state that intervention was used as a conflict resolution tactic, it was seen as mostly the teachers handling the intervention with authority and arbitration. Chapter 6 of Gladding states how modeling can “promote working in the group by displaying behaviors congruent with this stage, such as self-disclosure, or by having a core of group members with whom others can readily identify display such actions” (Gladding, p. 131, 2016).

A second literature review of “The Handbook of Conflict Resolution” also states how modeling is effective for creating a paradigm shift. My critique of the literature includes support of sharing the win-win attitude mentioned in resolving conflict. Authors assert how changing the system involves more than educating students, it “also involves educating yourself and other key people in the system such as supervisors, staff, teachers, and parents so that their actions reflect and support a win-win orientation” (Coleman et al. 2006).

The most important implication of cooperation-competition theory is that a cooperative or win-win orientation to resolving a conflict enormously facilitates constructive resolution, while a competitive or win-lose orientation hinders it. It is easier to develop and maintain a win-win attitude if you have social support for it. The social support can come from friends, coworkers, employers, the media, or your community (Coleman et al. 2006).

Developing a win-win attitude and getting the school on board with a peer mediation/CR program would lower suspension rates and promote positive school climate. Lastly, in the case of resistance due to program budget issues, the school can consider teaching all the material and exercises using a digital platform, instead of printed handouts, lowering the budget. Games and any activities bought for the class can also be shifted to more role-play technique and scenario games, rather than making purchases. Evaluation criteria for this group will be looking at school data every semester, comparing yearly suspension rates, and seeing any decreases in reports of student conflicts. Post-questionnaires will also be sent to students who participated in the CR group as well as to teachers who made recommendations for the group. With the completion of the group, students will be able to create a stronger classroom community, identify and manage their emotions better, develop stronger self-esteem and empathy for others, and practice respectful non-defensive dialogue and strong communication skills.

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