

Effect of Peer Counseling on Conflict Resolution among Secondary School Students in Eldoret East District

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Abstract

Strikes, unrest and student indiscipline in secondary schools have raised concern from leaders, parents, religious leaders and educators in addition to societal problems like drug abuse, HIV and AIDS. There has been advocacy for peer counselling for students to help manage social, psychological and educational problems. Consequently, this study was designed to investigate the effect of peer counselling on conflict resolution among secondary school students in Eldoret East district. The study was propounded on the basis of social learning theory by Bandura; which asserts that if peer counsellors provide good models and counselling to fellow colleagues, then they shall be imitated by peers. The study population of 3745 students in Eldoret East district was used from which a sample size of 265 students was obtained. Questionnaires were used as the main instruments of data collection. The data collected was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Findings showed that peer counselling had significant influence on conflict resolution among the students. The study concludes that better conflict resolution is a result of effective peer counselling. It is therefore recommended that schools should adopt peer counselling to help students deal with their issues that may degenerate into indiscipline or violence which may lead to destruction of property or life hence creating peaceful school environment where the students and teachers feel comfortable to be in and where each individual rights are respected. This paper will help secondary schools through departments of guidance and counselling to consider peer counselling in resolving conflict. It will also help the Ministry of Education to develop a curriculum for peer counsellors to be implemented by all schools with an effort of strengthening peer support to Guidance and Counselling.

Key Words: Peer Counselling, Conflict Resolution, Effect

INTRODUCTION

Bandura (1997) offers a set of theoretical concepts for understanding the complex events within people that must occur for observed models to produce changes in performance. The learner must observe the behaviour, remember it, be able to do it and be motivated to do it. Nothing will be learned that is not observed. This concepts reinforce the important role that peer counselling can play when used in schools to change student aggressive behavior such as, bullying, and fights or when disagreements arise among the students; as they will listen to or imitate the peers.

The fastest growing area of counselling is peer counseling which is a service provided by trained people to people of equal standing. In schools, the recipients of this service are the students; hence service providers will be other students who have acquired the necessary peer counselling skills. According to Sisco (2000), the goal of peer counselling is to enable the individual to meet personal needs in order to be more fully functional and take control of their lives in their home, community and employment.

Peer counselling is becoming increasingly important in schools because of numerous advantages. Nasibi (2003) argues that peer counsellors are in a better position to reach their fellow students more easily than a teacher-counsellor would. This is due to the fact that adults have no time for the youth because of the many preoccupations while the youth will always have time for one another. Adults cannot solve problems for young people but they can however provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to settle disputes peacefully.

Peer counselling has been in existence for many years and it has proved worthwhile. Organizations like alcoholic Anonymous (AA), the Cardinal Paraplegic Association of Children with learning disabilities among others can deliver important services to children as they use peer counselling as a feature of their service to those with special needs. With the rise in National employment of both parents there is increase in availability of pre-school education for very young children; hence the roles of peers and teachers have been brought into sharp focus as they spend more time with the children. Peers influence each other by serving as social models. Children acquire a wide range of knowledge and a variety of response by observing the behaviour of their peers. Children also learn new social skills through imitation, by modeling the dominant members of the group (Grusic & Abramovitch, 1982). The peer counsellors task is that of identifying students in need of help and reaching out to them or alerting the teacher counselor of any emerging or anticipated problems.

Kaplan (1996) argues that peer counselling in secondary schools provides a developmental opportunity for adolescents as well as a valuable outreach service for those in need of counselling and is more effective in interpersonal and decision – making skills. Kaplan notes that an effective peer counselling programme provides a variety of conditions under which adolescent may successfully complete the transition to responsible and satisfying adulthood. Cohen (1995) indicates that interpersonal conflicts are resolved through negotiation while parents attempt to resolve a conflict by dismissing it directly themselves or arbitration where a third party controls not only the process but the outcome or mediation. This occurs where a third party works with parties to structure win – win resolution in their conflict.

It is crucial to recognize the influence of peer counselling among the students in secondary schools. Seltzer (1989) observes that students in high school are in their adolescent years when they value the opinions of their peers. Managing conflict using peer counselling or mediation capitalizes the importance of peer influence in the lives of students. Peer mediation can help bring about reduction in suspensions, disciplinary referrals, academic disruptions and play ground fights.

Students can be provided with knowledge, skills and encouragement to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways using words instead of physical confrontation that may involve the use of weapons. Conflict resolution education includes negotiation, mediation and consensus decision making which allow peaceful resolution of any conflict. When the problem solving process to conflict and strife become a way of life, young people can begin to value getting along instead of getting even or getting their way.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was an ex-post-facto study that examined the situation as it is without any manipulation of variables. Questionnaires were used as the main instruments of data collection. A sample size of 265 students was used in data collection. The data collected was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Inferential statistics used was Chi-Square, Independent t-test. Data was presented in frequency tables and in figures.

RESULTS

Levels of Peer Counseling in Secondary Schools in Eldoret East District

Table 1. Peer counselling score

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Disagree	1	.4	.4	.4
Undecided	83	31.3	31.3	31.7
Agree	175	66.0	66.0	97.7
Strongly agree	6	2.3	2.3	100.0
Total	265	100.0	100.0	

The table shows that 66.0% agree that peer counselling is high in the school, while 2.3% strongly agree, 31.3% are undecided on whether peer counselling is ongoing in their school.

Influence of Peer Counselling on Conflict Resolution among Secondary School Students

The tables 2 and 3 show the cross tabulation and chi square test respectively of peer counseling and levels of conflict resolution among secondary school students.

Table 2. Cross tabulation peer counseling score * levels for conflict resolution cross tabulation

		Levels for conflict resolution		Total
		High	Low	
Peer Counseling score	Disagree	1	0	1
	Undecided	45	38	83
	Agree	104	71	175
	Strongly agree	3	3	6
Total		153	112	265

Table 3. Chi square test statistic

Statistic	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.506 ^a	3	.681
Likelihood Ratio	1.869	3	.600
Linear-by-Linear Association	.153	1	.696
N of Valid Cases	265		

The sample chi square statistic was 8.506. The tabulated value (critical value) at level of significance 0.05 (95%) and 3 degrees of freedom is 7.81. Therefore the sample chi square statistic is larger than the critical values. The statistic lies in the rejection region and therefore we accept the null hypothesis and conclude that there is significant relationship between peer counseling and conflict resolution. This may be because students feel free to approach colleague peer counsellors whenever they are faced with conflicts. Also students may have embraced peer counseling, adapted counseling skills like effective communication and mediation which they use in sorting out differences between themselves, therefore resolving conflict peacefully.

DISCUSSIONS

It's widely acknowledged that competence in conflict resolution skills leads to increased social and academic achievement in the short run and a more harmonious world in the long run (Van Slyck & Stern, 1991). There is therefore a need for students to know how to manage and resolve conflicts if they are to become responsible members of schools especially among their peers. According to the Kenya Institute of Education (2004) peer counselling is a recent phenomenon, which is rapidly gaining momentum. Positive behaviour among students has been observed in schools where peer-counselling programmes have been established and peer counsellors equipped with relevant knowledge and skills.

However, in this study, a majority of the student respondents believed that there exists high levels of peer counselling. This is expected since the author chose schools which have active peer counselling programmes. It is also attributed to the benefits peer counselling bring into the conflict resolution for example age appropriateness as counselors understand and are able to operate within the other students' frame of reference, availability of peer counselors whom the students can reach out to at any time, the fact that in peer counselling the disputants openly discuss their problems, come up with solutions which are not imposed on them and they strive to implement the agreements. It should be noted that other factors come into play that may hinder positive behaviour in the students. They include teacher responses to peer counseling programmes. Teachers ought to be role models and a source of encouragement to students, interact freely and provide the students with moral support. However if they are not active then the programme will be in jeopardy. This is in agreement with Children's Right Development Unit (CRDU, 1993) which has in essence encouraged strong peer support, after recognition that peer counselling support in many schools is weak. Nasibi (2003) argues that peer counsellors are in a better position to reach their fellow students more easily than a teacher-counsellor would. Peer counselling has been found to

contribute to development of students' personal and social development. Ortiz (1999) in his article on peer mediation and conflict observed that mediating differences as they arise brought about significant decrease in the number of students predisposed to violence. The process enabled them to explore their feelings and get to the root of the problem. The paper has demonstrated the important role of peer counseling which should therefore be embraced by many institutions.

In peer counselling among students in school, the student receiving counselling is given the opportunity to model after someone whom she or he has reached out to. This occurs as postulated by Bandura (1997) in his social learning theory which states that human beings learn through imitation, modeling and vicarious experience leading to modified behaviour. One is given the opportunity to develop coping skills that presumably work with the peer counsellor she or he is relating to. Bandura (1997) states that one learns to advocate for herself or himself and the feelings of self-worth are enhanced due to understanding and reinforcement by the counsellor. On the other hand, the counselor's self-worth is enhanced and will reach out to others as he or she can draw on a wide range of unique experience which cannot be observed by anyone else

It is well documented that as an individual moves through adolescence, peers become increasingly important and time spent with peers and the proximity with them increases between ages 13-20 (Bandura, 1997). Peers can naturally fill several mentoring roles; for example that of a daily companion in and out of school, or in the case of friends in groups who are viewed as role models because of manner of dress, activities, attitudes and behaviour. As Bandura states with reference to vicarious learning, learning through modeling occurs after one seeing the model, remembering and later replaying what he/she has observed. Peers provide counseling and support when problems arise, hence peer counseling should be strengthened in secondary schools to empower peers with knowledge and skills to be able to help each other when faced with conflict and challenges within school or outside school.

During the spate of strikes in Kenya in 2008, 300 schools were rocked by violent strikes, for example one student died in a dormitory in Upper Hill High School in Nairobi, burning of a dormitory at Queen of Apostles Minor Seminary (Opondo, 2008). The Minister for Education reported in parliament that the ministry had developed manuals on safety and peace education. This was to form the basis of healing the students. The manuals were to be part of the curriculum, therefore supporting the research objective of investigating effect of peer counseling on conflict resolution.

Peer counseling has a very powerful influence on behaviour and social development. Many students behave differently with their peers from the way they do with family members when they meet, e.g. a teenager may be uncommunicative and unresponsive towards his or her parents but when with their peers may be animated, lively and very talkative. Peer mediation programs, where students are trained generally to resolve disputes involving other students, have been shown to be an effective means of resolving disputes in school settings. Success rates of 58% to 93% have been achieved at various sites where success was measured by whether an agreement was reached and maintained at the time of a follow-up evaluation (Lam, 1988; Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992). There is anecdotal evidence that students transfer the mediation techniques learned in

school that help in the resolution of conflicts in many situations. Students have reported using their mediation skills to resolve disputes at home with their siblings and in their schools with peers (Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992). Peer mediation encourages a paradigm shift in behaviour management strategies where adults are responsible for managing student behaviour to where students work cooperatively and constructively with others. According to Van Slyck and Stern (1991), educators searching for a way to reduce negative interactions and increase positive ones are finding that school based conflict management and mediation programs can provide a structure for students to acquire positive interaction skills. Recognizing the importance of directly involving youth in conflict resolution, many schools and communities have resorted to using the Peer Mediation approach. Under this approach, special trained student mediators' work with their peers to resolve conflicts. Mediation programs reduce the use of traditional disciplinary actions such as suspension, detention, and expulsion; encourage effective problem solving; decrease the need for teacher involvement in student conflicts; and improve the school climate.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that peer counselling had a significant effect on conflict resolution among the students. In cases where there were effective peer counselling processes there tended to be high levels of conflict resolution. From this, it was concluded that better conflict resolution was a result of peer counselling among students. Peer counseling occurs on the premise that students are chosen to be mediators and trained as peer counselors. With the skill they help their fellow colleagues understand the cause of conflict, listen to both disputants, their feelings or divergent opinion and assist them to reach an agreement. The students change their behaviour through vicarious reinforcement that involves seeing and recalling the model being reinforced (Bandura, 1986).

The paper further recommends the need to promote peer counseling and conflict resolution programmes in schools through training peer counselors for them to understand their roles and responsibilities and to obtain up to date skills and knowledge in running groups and tackling emerging issues.

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BIO-DATA

Jennifer Kiprono holds B.Ed. (Arts) and MPhil. (Guidance and Counselling) from Moi University. She is currently pursuing her PhD. in guidance and counselling at Kisii University. Her research interests are in peer counselling among the youth.