

MEDIATION IN RESOLVING CONFLICTS BETWEEN CHIMERIC SCHOOL GROUPS – A RESTORATIVE PRACTICE IN SCHOOL

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Abstract. The relatively new phenomenon in school settings – chimeric school groups – creates new school ethos and deserves privileged attention and research. Apparently, new approaches are needed too. Mediation as a universal restorative practice has been adapted to school environment. It is exiting to verify its productivity towards resolving conflicts between chimeric school groups.

Keywords: mediation, restorative justice, conflict resolution, chimeric school groups

Many new processes are developing in the school as a basic structure unit in our society. Some of them are micro-reflection of global public dynamics. Others are specific to the individuals in view of the personal peculiarities. They undoubtedly deserve attention and adequate response.

Chimeric school groups – characteristics and forms of existence

Deviations in the behavior of minors and adolescents in school are determined differently, which makes it difficult to complete sustainable patterns of risk factors stabilizing and adapting negative manifestations in behavior that are most often associated with the failure of social and school rules violations in relationships with students of the same age, teachers, parents or accentuations having different dimensions. The period of adolescence is quite dynamic for similar events and not necessarily have to be interpreted as forms of deviant or delinquent behavior, but undoubtedly there are signals of the existence of a specific risk which often occurs, develops and supports in the school environment. This risk in general terms can be seen as a set of circumstances that increase the likelihood of developing illegal, deviant behavior by particular symbiosis of external conditions (school environment) and internal factors (individual risks [biological and psychological], personal characteristics of the student).

Micro-social environment: family, school and the reference circle of friends are undoubtedly essential for personal development, but also for the creation of risks of a different nature, on this development. Without discussing in details

the emergence of the primary risks on which students can not influence, we will take account of the ensuing negative behavior formed in the school environment by creating and functioning chimeric school groups, widening the deviations in the behavior of students and convertible into secondary risks critical to adolescents.

According to Toshev (2003) the previous century is connected to the creation of many different chimeric groups. Often behavioral effects in chimeric groups whose recognition is not difficult, because of their distinctive features, are an expression of “their chimerical psyche” relating to the adaptation of these groups to the new cultural or social environment. Chimeric groups in school and related manifestations are a major exponent of antisocial behavior, aggression, violence and various conflicts in the school environment.

These groups creating in the school environment and operating often at the territory of a school, such as school subcultures create conditions for deepening of the accentuations. Various behaviors reactions as syndrome of strong passions, striving for independence and hidden emancipation, sexual attraction or participation in various chimeric groups are becoming a gateway to the deviant and / or delinquent behavior. Our observations on the school environment and practices occurring in it, suggests that chimeric groups often even resemble structurally and functionally organized criminal groups in society.

The reasons for the inclusion of students in different chimeric groups, which are often the basis for the manifestation of abnormal behavior at the school, are summarized in Table 1, which presents an expert opinion on the issue of teachers, school counselors and psychologists working specifically on issues deviations in behavior in the school environment. Interviews with them and the subsequent statistical analysis of their answers enable risk factors (only statistically significant) to be ranked according to their weight in the factor matrix.

Table 1. Risks at school

Nº	Risks of school environment	Factor weight
1	Tolerance of unacceptable behaviors by teachers and school government	0,82
2	Difficulties in adaptation of moving in another school	0,74
3	Criminogenic family environment	0,72
4	Connection with students of chimeric groups from other schools	0,67
5	Unreasonable punishments by teachers and disregard of success	0,65
6	Relations with the students from the class	0,58
7	Non-engagement of students in the free time – the lack of alternatives	0,55

These risk factors create conditions to support the positive image of the subject with deviant behavior in the school environment and the organization of these students in chimeric groups, creating conditions for solidarity with negative messages of the macro-environment and the creation of subsequent risks for other students. This creates conditions for conflicts between students' members of such groups at various levels in the school and social environment as a whole, which are often a prerequisite for school adaptation, delinquent behavior and represent secondary criminogenic risks. These students have difficulty to adapt to the school class, to understand the study content and their educational development is difficult. They constantly need conflicts with authorities; their socialization is difficult and permanently creates preconditions for conflicts of different nature.

The chimeric group is their leading reference environment, with different "values", with specific mechanisms and functioning with informal relationships. It is consolidated on the basis of interest (common to its members), which clouded the inability to complete integration and socialization members and school environment as negative deviation from the norm is part of group policy, and any attempt to identify the performances of some members of the chimeric group is punished for the integration of the others to be continuously enhanced.

The inability of the school to create an emotional connection of the students with school deepens all these processes. This problem and its relation to public chimeric groups deserves attention, especially in the context of "the destruction of the family and society" (Peteva et al., 2011) and the consequences in the school environment.

This natural for members of chimeric groups conflict with the norms and people can hardly be overcome by prohibitions and penalties in the school environment, which requires searching for mechanisms to resolve conflicts of this nature. Many students are often victims of abuse by members of the chimeric groups, this implies the use of preventative and integrative practices, such as those of restorative justice to address the consequent risks.

Restorative practices in school context

It is common that many young people in school commit offences or are victims of an offence or other antisocial act committed by separate individual or a group. Punishment is usually seen as the most appropriate response to wrongdoing in schools. It is essential to explore alternatives to punishment as it could be counter-productive. Lately, restorative approaches have been considered as a relevant way of addressing school violence.

Restorative justice in its original form is considered to be a new way of thinking about crime and criminal justice, emphasizing the ways in which

crime hurts relationships between people who live in a community. Crime is seen as something done against a victim and the community – not simply as a law breaking act and a violation against the state. Restorative justice provides an expanded role for victims and requires offenders to take responsibility for their actions and for the harm they have caused. Restorative justice gets the community involved in a variety of preventative and responsive programs to bridge gaps between people, build their sense of safety and strengthen community bonds (Zehr, 1985).

The underlying values of a restorative justice approach are based on respect for the dignity of everyone affected by the crime. Priority is given to addressing the human needs of participants and empowering them to communicate their thoughts and feelings in an open and honest way. The goal is to build understanding, to encourage accountability and to provide an opportunity for healing. A restorative justice process encourages the offender to take responsibility for their harmful behaviour in a meaningful way, to gain insight into the causes and effects of that behaviour on others, to change that behaviour and to be accepted back into the community. The process gives the victim a forum to ask questions, receive answers, gain understanding, explain the impact of the crime on them and contribute to the outcome of the process.

The process may result in the victim receiving an apology, restitution, services or some other form of reparation. Restorative justice processes have the potential to provide the community with an opportunity to articulate its values and expectations, to understand the underlying causes of crime and to determine what can be done to repair the damage caused. In doing so, it could contribute to community wellbeing and potentially reduce future crimes (Zehr & Mika, 1998).

Mediation is widely accepted as a basic and a universal model of restorative justice with broad application, including schools. There are many reasons. Young people need to have affection, and respectful physical contact with others; they need to be comforted when they are upset, listened to with sympathy, taken seriously, and given opportunities to share feelings, including difficult ones like anger, fear and anxiety. They need to have access to educational opportunities in contexts that are supportive, that prepare them for the roles of adult life, and in which there are resources to help them realize their potential. They also need to gain the experience of taking responsibility for themselves and others in age-appropriate ways, and of dealing constructively with the ethical dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts that they will inevitably encounter in their lives (Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Sharp & Cowie, 1998). School mediation offers all these, that is why it is so appropriate in resolving conflicts and troubles in school context.

Mediation as a restorative intervention in school

Mediation in school can take many forms: (I) peer mediation for minor disputes between pupils; (II) mediation by adults between pupils in more serious conflicts; (III) victim-offender mediation; (IV) mediation between teaching staff in dispute; (V) mediation between parents and teaching staff.

A starting point of mediation is that the people in conflict are the ones best placed to find ways forward. According to Nils Christie's (1977) famous theory the conflicts are property and have to be returned back to their proper owners.

Generally, mediation is a process in which people in conflict are supported by a neutral third party (mediator) to find a mutually acceptable solution. Further the term mediation will be used, recognizing that sometimes the process deals with a behaviour problem and sometimes with an offence and a harm caused.

Peer mediation is the term given to this process when the mediators are pupils mediating their peers. Peer mediation in schools offers a concrete route to increasing the participation of young people in the institutions that serve them and in wider society. It offers them the opportunity to volunteer their time to help others in a concrete and constructive manner. Increasing numbers of schools are recognizing that young people themselves can and should find the solutions to their own conflicts (Cohen, 1995; Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

Mediation in school model scheme

Initially *preparatory meetings* are to be organized between the mediator and all parties in conflict to get them agree to mediation, considering that mediation is a voluntary process. If all sides have agreed to meet, a suitable time and a safe and comfortable place has to be found.

Mediation session (contents)

1st stage: introduction

The mediator welcomes all parties; Explaining purpose, establishing guidelines and contracting the rules; Establishing a sense of safety; conveying respect and belief in parties' capacity to find a way forward; The mediator explains his/her role to remain impartial and not to make judgments, to support the parties and to respect confidentiality.

2nd stage: story-telling

The mediator gives each person an opportunity to explain what has happened from their perspective, and what led up to it; to share thoughts and feelings he/she had during the time of the conflict and at the moment and talk about who else may have been affected.

The mediator decides what questions to ask each person, and when.

No strict rules which goes first. It might be the person who first raised the question about the conflict, the party who indicates he/she wants to speak first etc. The mediator encourages both sides to listen to and recognize the other's point of view; and finally - reframing the stories.

3rd stage: problem-solving

Identifying problems and needs and exploring the opportunities for reaching a mutually acceptable agreement; supporting those in conflict to identify the key issues, and to attack the problem, not the person; encouraging both sides to find a solution, how the things can be put right and the harm can be repaired, or at least to discover new ways of seeing the situation.

4th stage: agreement

Selection of solution on which both parties can agree; clarification of what has been agreed, perhaps in writing; ensuring understanding of the agreement and securing commitment to the agreement.

5th stage: closure

Acknowledgment of the progress made, even if no resolution has been reached.

Some models include a *monitoring meeting* after the mediation session to review the accomplishment of the agreement (Hopkins, 2004).¹⁾

Possibilities of mediation as a restorative approach for social-pedagogical work with chimeric student groups

In a global aspect there is no plenty of examples for successful application of mediation as a restorative approach for social-pedagogical work with chimeric student groups as they are pretty new phenomenon. However, its universality allows to be claimed that mediation could be a relevant instrument.

Mediation approaches offers a structured method for empowering young people themselves to defuse interpersonal disagreements among peers, including bullying, racist name-calling, fighting and quarreling. These methods are reported to result in a substantial decrease in the incidents of aggressive behaviour. Trained peer mediators meet as a team to encourage problem-solving between individuals and groups that are in conflict. The method is "no blame" and the aim is that each disputant comes away from the mediation with a positive "win-win" experience and the sense that the outcome is fair for all. Mediation and conflict resolution build on listening skills by adding a step-by-step process that facilitates individuals and groups who are in disagreement to a mutually acceptable solution. The main components include the idea that conflict is not bad in itself; that conflict not

be a contest, and that is important to distinguish between what people want and why they want it. During the mediation the pupils themselves are responsible for resolving the conflict and for working out a joint solution. Through participation in the process of mediation, pupils develop competence in handling conflicts and acquire new social and communication skills (Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

Mediation continues to expand, both geographically and in terms of scope. Depending on its purpose, there are three main consolidated mediation models or schools worldwide: the Traditional-linear Harvard model, which seeks to find an agreement between the parties; the Circular-narrative model, which apart from the agreement also emphasizes communicational aspects; and the Transformational model, more focused on relational aspects between the parties than in the adoption of agreements.

We will present three different existing mediation models or schools.

The traditional-linear Harvard model

The model is followed at Harvard's well-known business school and Roger Fisher and William Ury are its most outstanding representatives. It consequently comes from the fields of law and economics, and its main aim is to reach an agreement between the parties. This model is based on the linear causality of conflict (there is a cause for that conflict, namely: disagreement) and it pays attention to communication in its verbal dimension and understood in a linear way, but not to the relational aspects between the parties (Fisher et al., 1992).

Circular-narrative model

Its most important representatives are Sara Cobb (1994) and her disciples. This model focuses on communication, both in its verbal aspects (digital communication) and non-verbal aspects (analogue communication). The model is based on a circular causality as it considers that there is not a single cause leading to a certain result, but rather a feedback loop underlying a circular causality. It draws on theories and techniques from other areas of social life. This model seeks to change the story that the parties bring with them to the conflict by building an alternative story, and to reach an agreement as well. Therefore, it pays attention both to relationships and to agreements.

Bush and Folger's transformative model

The most relevant figures are Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger. This approach draws on psychology's humanist theory and on critical and social transformation approaches from the field of education, and focuses on the relational aspects rather than on the adoption of resolutions. It works mostly on achieving empowerment, mutual recognition of the parties involved. This will allow them to act in the mediation process, to recognise the other party

as a co-protagonist in the conflict and to take responsibility for their actions. This approach is based on the new communication models and fully recognises circular causality. It could be described as the opposite model to the traditional-linear model, as it does not focus on the agreement but rather on the relationships (Bush & Folger, 1994; 1996).

Conclusion

Although more research into this area is needed, it does appear that mediation can have positive effect on bullying, self-esteem and locus on control amongst pupils' groups. It is also appear to have beneficial effect on their personal, social and conflict resolution skills. Caution does, however, need to be applied as mediation is a sophisticated process with a rich social and psychological history. If misunderstood, or misapplied its benefits may be lost, which should not happen.

NOTES

1. <http://www.vista-europe.org/>

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