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Discovering Discourse: Utilizing Peer Mediation in Middle School to Achieve Literacy

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DISCOVERING DISCOURSE: UTILIZING PEER MEDIATION IN MIDDLE SCHOOL TO
ACHIEVE LITERACY

by

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DEDICATION

This work is primarily dedicated to my daughter, Ellie. As your life unfolds and presents challenges to you, do not be afraid to face them. You will always have my love and support, as I have had yours during our tougher times. This is also dedicated to my “village” who helped with Ellie while I worked: Mom, Dad, Jesse, Tracy, Julie, Olivia, Sam, and especially Joey. I love you all very much.

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The first educator I would like to acknowledge is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Wilson. You have served as my role model and your work, positive attitude, and spirit continues to inspire me. I offer deep gratitude to Dr. Lilly, who has been very helpful in offering guidance and helping me channel my thoughts through the dissertation process. I would also like to thank Dr. Brant, Dr. Oglan, and Dr. Bogiages for serving on the dissertation committee.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of implementing a peer mediation program in a middle school setting through an action research framework, presented as a series of case studies. The group of students receiving the intervention are on one “team” in the middle school, sharing the same group of teachers. The team is on a lower academic track, and are marginalized due to this placement. The intervention’s impact on the participants’ Discourse will be explored.

Key terms: Discourse, bullying, middle school, literacy, motivation, peer mediation, 21st Century Skills, action research

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

How much instructional time gets wasted on preventable violence? While examining security footage of the school's latest fight, I watched in horror as I saw Danielle, one of my students, lunge toward Aria, grabbing her hair with one hand to keep her still, while beating her mercilessly with the other hand. The video showed other students gathered around them in a circle, watching with fascination—some cheering them on—until a teacher intervened, pulling Danielle away from Aria. Both girls were suspended for a few days, and when they returned, their schedules were changed so they would no longer share any classes. A fellow teacher told me how sad this particular case was because Danielle and Aria used to be such close friends. It makes me wonder what may have possibly happened between the two of them to cause things to escalate to this point. As their teacher it also makes me curious about what the school may possibly do to prevent such outbursts.

Topic: Peer mediation as conflict resolution

The action of changing schedules is not a terrible temporary solution for the above scenario, but until students are taught how to effectively resolve conflict on their own, the possibility of not appropriately dealing with new conflicts may always loom around the corner. When examining Schrupf, Crawford, and Bodine's *Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools Program Guide* (1997), one can conclude that soft responses to conflict occur when both parties in a situation want to agree or move

forward. In this case, the school's soft response is separating the two students to avoid future conflict, which is the most common type of soft response (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). This is a short-term solution and does not address the root of the conflict at hand. It teaches the students that their problems should be avoided rather than directly addressed and resolved.

While looking for answers, the teacher-researcher recalled the effectiveness of a peer mediation program she had seen utilized in the past where she attended high school. Peer mediation is the process by which one student serves as a neutral mediator between two or more other parties who have a conflict. The program at the high school didn't prevent students from fighting altogether, but it provided students with the time and space to clarify misunderstandings and express themselves in a safe environment without disrupting class. More importantly, it helped the students who served as peer mediators step into a leadership role by allowing them to facilitate communication between students who are experiencing conflict.

Based on his examination of the body of research surrounding the impact of peer mediation programs, Robert Harris (2005) states:

Extensive evaluation research of peer mediation programs has verified that they are successful in (1) resolving conflict between students; (2) teaching peer mediators conflict resolution knowledge, attitudes and skills; (3) reducing suspensions and discipline referrals; and (4) improving school climate (Carstarphen, Harris, & Shoeny, 1999; Crawford and Bodine, 1996; Jones, 2004;

Jones et al, 1997; Jones and Bodtker, 1998; Jones and Carlin, 1994; Long, Fabricius, Musheno, & Palumbo, 1998).” (as cited in Harris, 2005, p. 141)

Since the overarching goal of this research is to reduce behavioral issues and empower students to solve their problems in nonviolent ways, implementing a peer mediation program seems an appropriate choice for providing conflict resolution strategies.

Problem of Practice

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the chronic behavioral problems observed within a group of students, one of which very well may be the systematic practice of tracking, or separating students by academic ability. According to Nieto & Bode (2012), “The effectiveness of tracking is questionable. If the purpose of tracking is to provide access to opportunity for those who have been denied this access the most, it has failed badly. In many instances, it has had the opposite effect because tracking is largely propped up and sustained by social class interests,” (p. 111). There are three teams in the 7th grade at Westchester Middle School, the research site: One of which has a “STEM” (science, technology, engineering, and math) focus, and two that do not. The STEM team has an application process, resulting in a group of students with higher academic abilities and more parental involvement. The other two teams, which have a larger population of students receiving Special Education services, generally struggle more academically and behaviorally than those on the STEM team. On one of the teams, which will be referred to here as “Team Falcon,” has approximately 70 students, with only 10% scoring at or above their grade level for reading according to the STAR

assessment administered at the beginning of the school year. The STAR assessment is created by Renaissance Learning, most commonly known for creating the Accelerated Reader program. It measures a student's reading level in terms of Lexile level and grade level. Since the measure that is easiest to interpret is grade level, that is the dimension that will be used throughout this study.

The frequent conflict amongst students, some of which is definitely related to friction between "teams" within the student population, is a serious issue within this school, as it can cause class disruptions and impede the learning process, much to the dismay of the teachers and many students. The frequent fighting and continuous conflict may be a result of the frustrations that come with being placed on a lower track, which will be explored in more detail within the purpose statement. A similar case has been found in a school in Pennsylvania that had a "growing number of arguments, fights, and name calling incidents that were disrupting the educational process," (Gilhooley & Scheuch, 2000, p. 4). They implemented an effective Peer Mediation program to address the tensions and disruptions in their school. This resulted in 100 mediations in its primary year of the program, with a 98% success rate concluding with signed agreements between both parties (Gilhooley & Scheuch, 2000).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a peer mediation program with 7th grade students at Westchester Middle School. Students from Team Falcon will be selected to serve as peer mediators. Many of these students suffer from lack of self-esteem, struggle with literacy, and frequently exhibit bullying behaviors in the form of both verbal abuse and physical fighting. Within the context of this study, James Paul

Gee's definition of literacy will be used: "control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses)" (1987, p. 7). More details about literacy and discourse will be further discussed within the Significance/Rationale section of this chapter.

Establishing an Action Research study in this setting may help the teacher-researcher analyze the relationship between the peer mediation program as an intervention to bullying and behavioral problems in the classroom. It is also possible that an effective peer mediation may impact academic achievement for students with less class time spent by the teacher attempting to mediate social issues between students (Hansberry & Hansberry, 2018). An additional benefit may include an increase of reading comprehension due to the repeated reading required of leading mediation sessions (Dotson-Shupe, 2017). Literacy, or the proficiency in the discourse of school (Gee, 1987), may increase by immersing students in a new set of language tools and actions to utilize when presented with conflicts. Overall, a peer mediation program can add a restorative quality to a school. Hansberry and Hansberry (2018) define *restorative schools* as "...places where all students are asked to take care of one another, (p. 8)."

According to Richard Cohen (2005), "A large percentage of mediation sessions—almost 90 percent of school mediation sessions—result in the creation of agreements that are acceptable to the parties," (p. 32). Cohen (2005) also notes that students are also more likely to honor these agreements as a long-term solution when they are involved in the decision-making process, thus it is likely that the number of outside discipline measures may decrease as a result of implementing peer mediation programs.

Research Question

The teacher-researcher posed the following research question to guide the conceptual and methodological aspects of the study utilizing a Case Study Research

Design:

What is the impact of implementing a middle school peer mediation program as a secondary Discourse for participants on their literacy and acceptance of school Discourse?

Significance/Rationale of the Study

When students are systematically separated by ability, or “tracked,” by the school system, there is a noticeable difference in their discourse. James Paul Gee (1987, 2014) describes Discourse as a mode of language that is dependent upon context, and is reflective of one’s culture, actions, and identity, as well as the information intended to be communicated. For the remainder of this paper, Discourse will be capitalized to indicate that Gee’s (1987, 2014) definition, inclusive of culture and identity, is in use, rather than one that is purely linguistic.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) notes that families from certain backgrounds, particularly White families, have a primary Discourse, acquired at home, that is more aligned to that which is utilized in school, which makes for an easier transition into school and typically results in higher rates of success. It is not uncommon for public schools to make special programs, such as the STEM program, available to these families whose Discourse is more aligned to the Discourse of school as a way to ensure that they are not distracted by the children from homes where the Discourse is less aligned with school, who typically have a harder time adjusting to school culture.

Placement in these courses and/or programs is typically based on standardized test scores, which are widely considered to be socially biased (Nieto & Bode, 2012). In contrast to the STEM team at Westchester Middle, Team Falcon consists of three classes, two of which are inclusion classes, meaning that a significant number of the students receive special education services, and therefore require a special education teacher to be present in the room and co-teach for a portion of the class. This extra support can be helpful for students who need assistance in adjusting to the Discourse of school, as they are often afforded individual attention more frequently than if there is only one teacher present.

However, regardless of the amount of students requiring special education services, there is a significant portion of the population on Team Falcon who have a primary Discourse that is not well-aligned with the Discourse of school. The community where Westchester Middle School is situated is a very rural, and many of the families who attend are living in extreme poverty. The local dialect is very distinguishable from that of other communities, carrying influences from the local Native American Lumbee tribe, as well as a linguistic heritage of Scots-Irish decent, dating back to the Pre-Revolutionary War Era. The Discourse of the majority of the residents of Ireland County is not very aligned to the Discourse of school.

Lopez-Robertson, Long, and Turner-Nash (2010) emphasize the importance of school communities pursuing and constructing “counter narratives” to disrupt stereotypes surrounding groups of students who are typically marginalized. They argue that many teachers hold what is commonly referred to as a deficit view of children who come from poverty-stricken homes. These homes often have a primary Discourse that is different

from the Discourse of school, which impacts students' performances in school, or their literacy (Gee, 1987). Lopez-Robertson, Long, and Turner-Nash (2010) challenge teachers to gain a more complete understanding of a student's home culture by investigating a student's life story, and constructing a narrative that is not deficit-based—a counter narrative. The creation of the Peer Mediation program aims to provide a leadership opportunity for the students on Team Falcon to demonstrate competence and responsibility; disrupting any negative stereotypes that may be associated with children placed on the less privileged track, thus building upon the counter narrative of these children. The program may also provide participants with a secondary Discourse, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Two. The construction of a secondary Discourse, when used to build a counter narrative, is beneficial for both teachers and students, because the perceived possibilities for these students is no longer limited by a deficit view.

Theoretical Orientation

The teacher-researcher seeks to explore the connections between the internal processes of students, which is reflected through their primary Discourse (Gee, 1987), and their engagement with each other utilizing a secondary Discourse, which will be introduced through the peer mediation program. How well they acquire their secondary Discourse will be described as their literacy of and within that Discourse, as defined by Gee (1987). One's perspective is heavily dependent upon past life experiences, which are influenced by one's culture, and reflected through his or her speech and actions (Heath, 1983; Gee, 1987). Examining the juxtaposition between students' Primary Discourse and

the Secondary Discourse of school is a vital step for the teacher-researcher to consider when building a peer mediation program.

When a child enters a classroom for the first time, whether it is a daycare facility or a public school, he or she comes in with more knowledge and experience than most teachers may acknowledge. This background is sometimes referred to as the “funds of knowledge” in the field of education, meaning the cumulative body of knowledge used for household functionality (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The “funds of knowledge” are reflective of one’s culture and primary Discourse, as Shirley Brice Heath conveys in her book *Ways with Words* (1983), in which she studies two racial cultures and their use of language at home and in school. Heath finds that the language, actions, and perspective one brings to school can make a huge impact on their potential academic success, which supports Gee’s notion of literacy of a Secondary Discourse (1987). Unfortunately, that impact can be really positive for some groups, and detrimental for others. Students with a Primary Discourse that is more closely aligned to that of school do not require as much behavioral training because they have already learned to behave in certain ways that schools condone. If a student struggles with this, then much time is invested in correcting that behavior and academic some instructional opportunities may become lost. For example, if a child is taught at home not to interrupt adults, they may have an easier time with the timeless rule of raising your hand and waiting to speak than a child with a home Discourse that includes speaking freely amongst adults. One of the advantages of the peer mediation program is that it allows the Peer Leaders, who are the participants of this project, to draw from their funds of knowledge in order to think critically to troubleshoot social conflicts that arise among their classmates.

A student's primary Discourse, which is likened to an "identity kit" (Gee, 1987) contributes to his or her behaviors and attitudes at school. James Paul Gee (2007) argues that some students do identify themselves as the type of person who strives to become literate in the Discourse of school. To describe the motivational factor behind the desire to build upon a Secondary Discourse, Gee states, "Without such an identity commitment, no deep learning can occur" (2007, p. 55). In this case he is describing the identity kit associated with becoming a person who enjoys video games, and the conscious decision one must make to invest time, energy, and effort into learning that new Discourse (Gee, 2007). Likewise, students must desire to become literate in other Secondary Discourses, such as that of peer mediation. By becoming knowledgeable of his/her students' primary Discourses, a teacher is able to make content more relatable for his or her students and ensure that they feel valued. The teacher-researcher of this study also intends to use knowledge of the primary Discourse of her students to appropriately scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) the acquisition of the Discourse of peer mediation.

The peer mediation program will be designed to provide students with what Gee (1989) describes as an "apprenticeship" opportunity, because the teacher-researcher demonstrates competence within that Discourse, and models the language, behaviors, and beliefs that members of that Discourse utilize. During the scaffolding process, as students approximate (Cambourne, 1984) the behavior and speech of peer mediation, the teacher-researcher can provide feedback (Cambourne, 1984) to communicate how well aligned their attempts are to that of a proficient mediator. These approximations, according to Gee, are referred to as "mushfake," which is an attempt at the action or speech of a

secondary Discourse when a non-member of that Discourse does not yet feel like a member (Gee, 1989).

Because the Discourse of peer mediation is more academic and somewhat formal in nature, it can serve as a bridge between one's primary Discourse and the Discourse of school. Gee notes, "While we cannot build buildings by simply speaking words, there are, indeed, things we can build in the world by simply speaking words," (p. 31, 2014). He goes on to describe certain events that happen after certain words are said under the right conditions, such as a minister officiating a marriage. The Discourse of peer mediation may include the frequent use of questions to gain understanding, of identifying emotions to promote social awareness, and the overall purpose of finding a peaceable solution to problems, which may provide students with a repertoire of positive, affirming vernacular to use in tense situations. Instead of the home remedy of violent outbursts to resolve conflicts, students will be introduced to a variety of ways to solve problems in a way that may build confidence, vocabulary, and self-esteem. Under these conditions, Peer Leaders will help others scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) agreements that will resolve conflicts.

Action Research Methodology

Action research is described by Craig Mertler (2014) as systematic inquiry for the purpose of gathering information. He goes on to state, "Action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms," (p. 4). The basic stages he describes in the action research process include planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. These cyclical steps will be described in further detail within Chapter 3: Methodology.

Action research is considered beneficial in the field of education because it is conducted by teachers for teachers, intending to have an immediate effect of improvement on the educational environment (Mertler, 2014). This can be an improvement or change in instruction, the physical environment, or anything else over which the teacher-researcher maintains some degree of control. It is intended to help educators improve their own teaching or classroom environment in some way. Since each classroom can vary depending upon teacher, subject, and student population (which includes each new group of students who come in each year), the process remains ongoing and is adapted to best address the needs of each class.

Mertler (2014) also clarifies what does not constitute as action research, such as solely researching someone else's classroom or student population, or planning a one-time traditional study. More traditional studies can take place in universities, labs, or within classrooms, depending upon the study, but often the researcher is detached from the educational environment in some way (Mertler 2014). There are no conclusive results of action research, as it is a continuous process that can take place as long as a teacher is teaching.

The teacher-researcher in this study plans on implementing a peer mediation program with the goal of examining its impact on the 7th grade student-participants involved in the study. Conducting action research in a teaching environment is considered valid because it immediately has practical application to the teacher-researcher. Theory and practice are already infused within action research, which is often not the case in traditional educational research. The disconnect between theory and practice is often very noticeable to teachers once they begin their own journey as

educators (Johnson, 2008, as cited in Mertler, 2014). The quality of action research studies are often referred to as rigor (Mertler, 2014). This term is intended to describe the research process, rather than the instruments used within a study.

Conclusion

The goal of this research is to improve the lives of the students of Team Falcon, who are the targets of a deficit-based view due to their primary Discourse not being aligned with that of school. They are judged as a result by teachers, other students, and themselves. The peer mediation program will provide a platform for students to explore and build upon a counter-narrative for themselves that may help build their literacy with the Discourse of school. This new Discourse has the potential to help students build upon their identity and provide them an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and leadership at Westchester Middle School.

Key Terms Glossary

- Bullying:** Repeated aggressive behavior against an individual (Ahtola, A., Haataja, A., Kärnä, A., Poskiparta, E., & Salmivalli, C., 2012).
- Cyberbullying:** Using technology, such as social media or cellular devices, as a platform for bullying (Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2013; Paul, Smith & Blumburg, 2010).
- Discourse:** “A socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network,” (Gee, 1987, p. 1).

- Dispute/Conflict:** When two or more parties have a disagreement or misunderstanding (Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., Dudley, B., Mitchell, J., & Frederickson, J., 1997).
- Literacy:** “Literacy is control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses),” (Gee, 1987, p. 7).
- Peer mediation:** A form of conflict resolution performed by the intervention of a peer. Peer mediation programs provide formal training for students in mediation (Greenawald & Johnson, 1987; Johnson et al., 1992; Sorenson, 1992).
- Peer Leader:** A term designated for students who have trained to serve as peer mediators (Van Hassel, 2018).
- Restorative schools:** “Places where all students are asked to take care of one another” (Hansberry & Hansberry, 2018, p. 3).
- STAR Reading:** A reading assessment administered at least twice a year, created by Renaissance Learning, which is known for the Accelerated Reader program.
- Tracking:** “The placement of students into groups that are perceived to be of similar ability” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 110).
- Teaming:** All students in one “team” share the same set of core teachers in a middle school setting (National Middle School Association, 2010).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The major themes of study included in this review of literature include bullying, tracking and culture of the student population in the study, bullying intervention programs, peer mediation programs, and literacy of Discourse. First, the problem of practice will be reviewed, followed by the identification of the purpose of review and strategy for searching. Then a general overview of the teacher-researcher's theoretical orientation and positionality will be described. Next, the lens of Discourse theory will be explained. After that, the topics of bullying and tracking will be explored to capture the nuances of the Problem of Practice. Finally, bullying intervention programs, including peer mediation, will be described and analyzed to determine what factors contribute to a program's success.

Problem of Practice

The primary problematic behavior described in the problem of practice is bullying and conflicts in both verbal and physical manifestations, specifically on a middle school team of students which consists of a significant amount of struggling readers, called Team Falcon. Because of the obvious placement of students, the children quickly named themselves the "dumb team," which reflected a lack of self-esteem and confidence on their part.

Rationale. The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a peer mediation program with a select group of 7th grade students at Westchester Middle

School. The group consists of students who have been systematically disadvantaged due to the practice of tracking.

Underlying causes and research question. The following research question has resulted from looking at issues related to the problem of practice:

What is the impact of implementing a middle school peer mediation program as a secondary Discourse for participants on their literacy and acceptance of school Discourse?

This question led to a search of literature surrounding bullying behaviors, which are the primary concern in the problem of practice, as well as impacts on other areas in a student's life, such as academics and mental health issues. Some proposed causes of the bullying problem in this particular school include lack of education about conflict resolution, the bystander culture/attitude of encouraging conflicts, lack of consequences from administration for undesirable behavior, low self-esteem of the students on Team Falcon, and inconsistent expectations from the various teachers at the school. It is also possible that these behaviors stem from the very nature of the population of Team Falcon and their track record of disenfranchisement due to the mismatch between their home and school Discourse. Nieto & Bode (2012) describe resistance theory as a possible explanation of the lack of engagement within schools: "Frederick Erickson maintains that, whereas cultural differences may cause some initial school failures and misunderstandings, it is only when they become entrenched over time that *not-learning*, a consistent pattern of refusing to learn, becomes the outcome of schooling," (p. 267). This notion emphasizes that there is a repeated and somewhat universal Discourse of school in

the United States which encompasses how students must talk, act, and behave to find themselves in compliance and feeling like a valued member of the school.

This “identity toolkit” (Gee, 1987) is vital to a student’s academic success. This includes behaviors such as raising your hand before asking a question, asking permission to leave a room, speaking at lower volume level, being selective of vocabulary to avoid profanity, and more. Specifically at Westchester Middle School, students are expected to follow the school’s creed, which emphasizes the values of excellence, love, and accountability. Students at this school are asked to knock before entering a classroom. Students are expected to walk on a blue line when they are in the hallways, even if they are alone going to the library, the restroom, the office, or anywhere else in the building. All of these expectations and behaviors make up the Discourse of Westchester Middle School, and those who do not follow these expectations, for whatever reason, tend to get corrected. Sometimes the behavior of not adapting to this Discourse is unintentional, and sometimes it is intentional. The resistance theory (Nieto & Bode, 2012) describes those who are intentionally choosing not to conform to the Discourse of school. The purpose of the peer mediation program is to recruit students who often resist the Discourse of school and give them another secondary Discourse that helps them feel a sense of belonging within the school, which may eventually lead to the literacy in the school Discourse.

Strategy for searching. Most of the literature within this search involves the topics of a variety of types of bullying and bullying intervention programs, including peer mediation. The history of the practice of peer mediation is explored as well. The literature was procured through book purchases over a span of several years, as well as utilizing the

online search option to find articles through the Thomas Cooper Library's PASCAL system, including ERIC, ProQuest, EBSCO, and JSTOR databases.

Organization of chapter. The topics of bullying, tracking, bullying intervention programs, peer mediation programs, literacy and Discourse were studied to design an ideal peer mediation program. First the researcher's theoretical orientation is explained, then the lens of Discourse theory, followed by bullying and its impact on students, bullying intervention programs, and specific peer mediation programs.

Purpose of the Review

The purpose of the review of literature is to determine which, if any, studies are similar to the proposed research question and to build an argument that justifies the design of the study. According to Machi & McEvoy (2016), this literature is classified as a simple literature review, because it aims to document what is known about the topic of peer mediation, the intervention, and bullying, the problem of practice. In this case, it is the researcher's interest to find any other examples of peer mediation programs implemented as a form of bullying prevention. This literature review serves to refine the design of the study and ensure that research-based practices are being implemented when creating the peer mediation program for the purposes of bullying prevention.

Theoretical Orientation

Researcher positionality. The teacher-researcher will conduct research primarily from the perspective of a constructivist, which leads to the implementation of Discourse Theory, which is the major lens of this research (Gee, 1987;2014). Constructivism, also sometimes described as a Learner-Centered Ideology (Schiro, 2013),

focuses on the needs of a learner as an individual. Constructivists generally believe that learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978) and that learners construct meaning based upon their own individual life experiences (Bartlett, 1932; Vygotsky, 1978). The term typically used by educators and psychologists to describe the collective conceptual life experience is *schema* (Bartlett, 1932). The schema of the teacher-researcher includes the life experiences and viewpoints of a white female, a mother, a teacher, someone who has struggled economically, and as someone who attended a middle school that did not offer a variety of extracurricular opportunities. Because of these factors, the teacher-researcher finds value in offering opportunities and new experiences to every child to allow them to explore their own identities and find some value in their schooling experience beyond academics. James Paul Gee's (1987) Discourse Theory is the primary premise under which the project was designed because it operates with socio-constructivist assumptions, including the social nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Gee, 1987, 1989, 2007, 2014), as well as the need for scaffolding when acquiring a new Discourse (Vygotsky, 1978; Gee, 1987, 1989, 2007, 2014). More information about Constructivism and Discourse theory is offered below.

Constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) is known for conceptualizing what he describes as the zone of proximal development, which is the point when someone is very close to learning how to complete a task individually, but may still need some assistance. An example of this may be writing in cursive, but still relying on a visual model as a reminder if they forget what one of the letters looks like. Many educators refer to their part of supporting a student in the zone of proximal development as scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) also adds to the constructivist movement by emphasizing the social

aspect of learning. The meaningful interactions that people have with others enhance the experience of learning by allowing for people with diverse backgrounds and schemas to contribute new connections to a conversation or experience that otherwise may have gone unnoticed if one were experiencing something alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Training is a crucial part of the peer mediation program that will allow the teacher-researcher to scaffold learning around the students' zones of proximal development when it comes to the mediation process. The social nature of the training and mediation sessions may also aid in student learning when it comes to conflict resolution.

Constructivism is a movement that is still popular today, and the practice of honoring individuals, providing social opportunities for learning, activating background knowledge, and scaffolding student learning will likely not go away anytime soon. The learner-centered ideology emphasizes the need for individuals to show personal growth, and puts teachers in a position to empower and facilitate, rather than lecture and foster a teacher-centered classroom environment. All of the aforementioned elements can be used to design an effective peer mediation program that values the abilities and experiences of the student-participants.

Discourse Theory. As mentioned in Chapter One, when describing the notion of literacy, the definitions given by James Paul Gee will be utilized: “control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses)” (1987, p. 7). When describing the concept of Discourse, Gee (2014) posits that language is reflective of one's self-identity as well as the understanding of the identity of the target of one's communications. For example, when a student is speaking to a teacher, they may feel pressured to speak more formally than they would with a peer. Peer mediators can use

this difference advantageously to allow students to comfortably speak to each other in a relatively informal, lower-pressure setting than if they were to turn to a teacher or a guidance counselor for help with conflict resolution. The purpose of creating the peer mediation program is to provide students with a form of Secondary Discourse that they can use as tools in the process of conflict resolution.

The Discourse of peer mediation is designed to serve as a scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) between a student's primary Discourse and the Discourse of school. Peer mediators are trained to use new vocabulary, behaviors, and methods of communicating with the goal of conflict resolution. Gee states that, "If you put language, action, interactions, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of *who* (identity) engaged in a particular type of *what* (activity), here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer)," (2014, p 52). In the Discourse of peer mediation at Westchester Middle School, the language of conflict resolution includes referring to students engaged in conflict as "disputants," discussing "agreements," and identifying "red flag" behaviors in others. The physical actions of the Discourse of peer mediation include everyone sitting (as opposed to a leader who is standing, which subconsciously can make others feel uncomfortable or subservient in some way), possibly the shaking of hands (although this is not required), and the action of writing to document the stories of the disputants and create agreement contracts. The interactions of a peer mediation session include the practice of active listening, repeating and summarizing what a disputant says to ensure mutual understanding, and the practice of allowing everyone a full opportunity to speak. These actions and interactions reflect the

core beliefs of the peer mediators, which include that everyone deserves to have his/her voice heard, and there can be a peaceful resolution to every conflict. As a result of the aforementioned actions, interactions, and beliefs, anyone can easily identify the *who* (peer mediators) and the *what* (resolving conflict) of peer mediation, resulting in complete, identifiable secondary Discourse in which the peer mediators engage. This Discourse can scaffold students towards the Discourse of Westchester Middle School, including the talk, (which is respectful and well-meaning,) the actions, (which include active listening, taking turns with talking, and taking notes,) as well as the school's beliefs, which are outlined in the school's creed: excellence, love, and accountability.

Peer mediators use this Discourse to assist disputants in drafting their own agreements to resolve the conflicts of others, as well as themselves. Gee (2014) describes each context of language use as housing a "web of association," (p. 26). These webs serve as a situational database from which we access information as we choose our words in any given setting. For example, in a peer mediation session, students are:

- Sitting at a quiet table.
- Out of earshot of adults (and therefore may use language or share information they might not be comfortable sharing with adults).
- Not in the middle of a class or expected to pay attention to anything else.
- Told up front that they will each get a fair turn to share their side of a story.

The Discourse that a student chooses to utilize is a result of this web of associations (Gee, 2014). In a case when a student knows he or she will get a fair turn to speak, the probability of being interrupted decreases. When working within a session focused on just the problem at hand (as opposed to trying to discuss a conflict during

class), students are more likely to remain focused on listening and actively participate in attempting to find a resolution. The specific illustrations of the Discourse of peer mediation as it plays out at Westchester Middle School will be detailed in Chapter Four within the case studies.

Gee (2014) argues that each Discourse is not a neatly packaged “unit” (p. 54) that provides a set of language and behavioral tools in just one situation. There are numerous sets of Discourses that one can acquire throughout their life that can be utilized across a variety of contexts, depending upon one’s current “web of association,” (p. 26). The overarching goal of building the peer mediation Discourse with students is to expand their linguistic tool kit when it comes to matters of conflict resolution, which can also expand to other contexts in life, such as the academic Discourse of school.

Bullying in schools

Carlson (2017) notes the increase of bullying as a reflection of trends in American politics in a post 9-11 era. He illustrates his example by mentioning bullying and torture as a tactic used by Homeland Security to address the presence of illegal immigrants, which has essentially normalized the practice within American culture (Carlson, 2017). Schools, which can serve as a reflection of our society at large, are not immune to the systematic bullying and exclusion of minority populations in the United States. Many of the children in schools, particularly those who are identified as children of color, are faced with insurmountable adversity as a result. This is significant because it is the children of color who are disproportionately marginalized by the school system, largely due to the Discourse of school being more aligned to White middle-class primary Discourses.

Bullying awareness has appeared in the school Discourse over the last couple of decades. Thanks to this increase of awareness and anti-bullying campaigns, the amount of students reporting cases of being the victim of bullying has decreased from 31.7 percent in 2007 to 20.8 percent in 2015 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Despite the progress made towards reducing bullying, it still remains a concern. In this section, the concept of bullying and cyberbullying will be clarified, along with its relationship with school climate and mental health, both of which may be reflective of one's Discourse. Baly, Cornell, and Lovegrove (2014) found that over half of middle schoolers have been bullied at some point in time, but the majority of those bullied have not sustained repeated victimization over time. Students who reported themselves to be victims of bullying were found to be more likely associated with other factors, such as aggressive attitudes, feeling sad/unsafe, and fighting. In addition, bullying behavior has been linked to teen dating violence (Cutbush, S., Williams, J., & Miller, S., 2016). According to Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot (2017), it also has a direct relationship to other risky behaviors, including drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, and weapon use in middle and high school students. The bullied children can suffer from long term consequences, both psychological and legal in nature. Researchers suggest that a large portion of these risky behaviors can be attributed to bullying (Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2017). As a bullying intervention, it follows that a peer mediation program, which is designed to scaffold students towards the Discourse of school, would also reduce the probability of students participating in risky behaviors or experience adverse mental health effects.

Evolution of terminology. The term “bullying” is a more recently popular word used to describe the behaviors of aggressive conflict among students, but the main difference to bear in mind is that bullying is always defined as being a repeated aggressive behavior (Ahtola et al., 2012), while a conflict may be a one-time occurrence, is considered inevitable, and is also described as “opportunities for positive outcomes as clarifying personal identities and values, increasing social status, promoting personal growth, generating interpersonal insight, and creating heroic drama (Johnson et al., 1997). Johnson et al. (1997) posits that the typical way conflicts are resolved among children are often destructive in nature, and can include bullying, unless they are trained otherwise. Since bullying behavior is one major result of students’ difficulty in acquiring the Discourse of school, the peer mediation program will be designed as an intervention for bullying in hopes of scaffolding students toward the school Discourse, which involves conflict resolution in a peaceful, non-destructive manner.

Bullying vs. conflicts. Bullying and frequent conflict are a result of the illiteracy of students in the Discourse of school. While the intervention of peer mediation is typically described as a form of conflict resolution (Sorenson, 1992), it would follow that a conflict resolution program may be effective as an anti-bullying intervention if implemented properly since bullying is an extended form of conflict (Ahtola et al., 2012). According to Datta, Cornell, & Huang (2016), a contributing factor to bullying is the behavior of bystanders who do nothing, or worse, encourage other students when a conflict arises. They argue that an effective anti-bullying program addresses these behaviors so students know how to act when a conflict or bullying incident occurs.

Cyber bullying. Paul, Smith, & Blumburg (2010) indicate that cyber bullying is a common, yet new, form of bullying that takes place in schools. They state that “differentiating cyberbullying from traditional forms of bullying is based on the channel through which the behaviour may arise. In this instance, the victims are targeted using technology, primarily email and text messaging,” (Paul, Smith, & Blumburg, 2010, p. 158). Burton, Florell, & Wygant (2013) also indicate that the increasing popularity of social networking sites and the anonymity of cyber bullying are contributing to the problem. A specific example of cyber bullying and its detrimental consequences is the case of Tyler Clementi, who was a university student who was spied on by his roommate via webcam while kissing a man, and then shared the footage to social media for others to watch (Carlson, 2017). This resulted in his suicide in September 2010, along with an onslaught of news coverage featuring the problem of bullying, homosexual youth as targets, and the failure on the part of the schools to prevent or stop these tragic consequences and properly protect its students (Carlson, 2017). One of the goals of the peer mediation program is to become a vehicle for schools to allow students to address their conflicts with one another, such as if someone posted something on social media that was upsetting. The Discourse of peer mediation allows students the option to confront their aggressors in a safe environment, surrounded by supportive peers, which may help them feel braver about addressing the problem. Also, when peer mediators are trained to detect “red flag” behaviors, such as any mention of suicide, they can immediately report these things to certified guidance counselors and/or school social workers who can intervene with a crisis team.

School climate. School climate is generally defined as “the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over a period of time” (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, p. 122). The Discourse of a school can be influenced by school climate, since it is the collective feelings of both students and staff. However, school climate can be influenced by the primary Discourse of students, particularly if there is either a large number of students who are literate in the school’s Discourse—resulting in a positive school climate—or if there is a large number of students who are not literate in the school’s Discourse—resulting in a negative school climate.

In her dissertation regarding peer mediation as an intervention, Deborah McKay (2007) explored how the implementation of a peer mediation program influenced bullying and school climate in four different areas, including student victim perceptions, and three varieties of teacher perception, such as school climate and student-related factors. School climate-type questions were given via a survey to both teachers and students before and after the program was used as an intervention. There were slight changes, although not statistically significant, in other measured areas as well. McKay (2007) notes that there is a natural fluctuation in stress-related outlook about the school environment as the school year progresses, so it is difficult to accurately gauge pre- and post- surveys that are related to school climate as the natural stress of the school year is a confounding variable.

It can generally be concluded that the school climate of a particular learning environment can be detrimentally impacted by the problem of bullying (Ahtola et al., 2012; McKay, 2007). When using teacher and student outlooks as a barometer of the

school environment, a change for better or worse has the potential to indicate how effective an intervention is, such as an anti-bullying program (Ahtola et al., 2012; McKay 2007). It can be argued that an effective bullying intervention program will be beneficial to the school climate as well as the school Discourse.

Mental health effects. The mental health of students is greatly impacted by their learning environments (Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004). By providing the leadership opportunity of becoming a peer mediator to only students on Team Falcon, the goal is to disrupt the current stereotype of incapability. This intervention is intended to lead to an increase in self-esteem, and eventually an increase in achievement as well, as there is a direct correlation between these two factors (Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004).

Richard Cohen (2005) explores the psychological aspects of peer mediation, noting that a feeling of self-worth and belonging must occur before a student will care about achievement, and notes the Hierarchy of Needs theory from well-known psychologist, Abraham Maslow (in Cohen, 2005). In addition to increasing the self-esteem of its participants, any reduction in the act of bullying would therefore also reduce risk factors associated with victimization, such as depression (Lereya, Copeland, Zammit & Wolke, 2015) or suicide (Carlson, 2017). Any positive mental health changes, such as increasing self-esteem or harboring a sense of belonging will increase a student's chances of becoming more literate in the Discourse of school.

Huang, Cornell, & Konold (2015) have found that there is a direct relationship between aggressive attitudes and aggressive behaviors in middle school students. These attitudes and behaviors, both of which are reflective of one's primary Discourse, may be

the result of illiteracy in the Discourse of school. These attitudes and behaviors are likely aggressive in nature as a result of the frustration that comes along with the feeling of not belonging that accompanies the struggle with acquiring school Discourse. In addition to aggressive attitudes, Burton, Florell, & Wygant (2013) found that there is a negative relationship between peer attachment and bullying. In other words, the more a student engages in bullying behavior, the less likely they are to form healthy relationships with their peers, which is also not aligned with the Discourse of school, which typically prioritizes healthy social relationships.

Lereya et al., (2015) conducted a longitudinal study over the course of 13 years to examine the long-term effects of bullying on the mental health of those who have been bullies and/or those victimized in a school setting. The researchers wanted to see if there was more of an impact on mental health depending upon the role that someone assumes within a bullying situation, which could very well be reflective of their primary Discourse. Lereya et al. (2015) discovered that both bullies and victims are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems by the age of 18, such as depression, anxiety disorders, and psychotic experiences. However, Lereya et al. (2015) uncovered the fact that children who have participated in both bully and victim roles are the more likely to develop mental health problems than pure victims or pure bullies. The group of children who engaged in bullying behaviors in secondary school are more likely to have already engaged in bully/victim roles in primary school. Lereya et al. (2015) concluded that victimization should be considered a risk factor by physicians when diagnosing certain mental health problems. No significant differences were found between the bully/victims and pure victims and their likelihood to develop mental health problems,

despite the fact that both groups are more likely to develop problems than those who have not experienced bullying at all (Lereya et al., 2015). Because of these detrimental effects of bullying, it is important for schools to create and sustain bullying intervention programs, such as peer mediation, to aid in the sense of belonging that can increase the likelihood of students acquiring the Discourse of school.

Overall, it can be concluded that both bullies and their victims suffer long-term consequences when it comes to mental health (Burton, Florell, & Wygant. 2013; Huang, Cornell, & Konold, 2015). Bullying can be detrimental to a student's self-esteem and lead to depression and other mental health issues, including suicide (Carlson, 2017; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014; Lereya et al., 2015). By reducing bullying and providing a more supportive, emotionally safe environment to students, schools have the potential to promote positive emotional and mental health, which may allow students to better focus on their studies (McKay, 2007). Hansberry & Hansberry (2018) argue that promoting this type of restorative environment is beneficial for the entire student body. By intervening with a peer mediation program, the detrimental effects of bullying may be minimized, and a secondary Discourse can be provided for both bullies and victims to increase a sense of membership within the school Discourse.

Tracking and benefits of intervention

The concept of tracking will be clarified, along with some information about how Team Falcon may benefit from being selected as leaders both socially and linguistically. The students on Team Falcon have all been placed together due to a practice called tracking. Tracking is a means of marginalizing students who are not literate in the Discourse of school, by segregating students into different classes based upon academic

ability (Nieto & Bode, 2012). In this case, the majority of the students placed on Team Falcon are not on grade level for reading according to their STAR assessment report administered in the Fall of 2017. In contrast, the majority of the students on the STEM team were either at or above grade level according to the same assessment given at the same time. The STEM team of Westchester is more literate in the Discourse of school than Team Falcon and tends to be more academically successful.

The practice of tracking. Nieto & Bode (2012) question the ethics of tracking, as well as the actual benefits it is meant to provide students. Rhonda Jeffries and Hope Reed (2015) found that in some settings the students who are placed on the lower achievement track are disproportionately from lower-income families who are already marginalized, which Heath (1983) established are less likely to have a primary Discourse that is aligned with the Discourse of school. The tracking of the students on Team Falcon resulted in a noticeable difference in the socio-economic makeup of its children, which will be examined further below. Other noticeable differences include academic ability levels, lack of parental involvement/communication with the school, and the scores of achievement tests in a variety of subjects, including reading.

Mortimer Adler (2017) argues, “We should have a one-track system of schooling, not a system with two or more tracks, only one of which goes straight ahead while the others shunt the young off onto sidetracks not headed toward the goal our society opens to all” (p. 194). While a one-track system may not necessarily be the solution to this problem, Adler (2017) makes a valid point that one track is typically bound for success, while the children on the other tracks are systematically disenfranchised and are excluded from the membership of the school Discourse, and therefore, academic success.

Valenzuela (2017) echoes Adler's concern for tracking and its impact on students when she describes a high school in a case study:

Excepting those located in the privileged rungs of the curriculum—that is, honors classes, the magnet school program, and the upper levels of the Career and Technology Education (CTE) vocational program—the academic trajectories of the vast majority are highly circumscribed. (p. 268).

By describing the upper level classes as privileged, Valenzuela (2017) illustrates the injustice being thrust upon the students who are not placed in these classes, which often determines their academic futures. This conspicuous rift between the two groups can lead to tension in the form of bullying and conflict, both between the groups and within the marginalized population, which has been denied membership within the school Discourse, depriving them of a sense of belonging.

Development of language and social skills. Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2014) insist that the frequent practice of speaking is often lacking in a classroom setting, and many students are not given enough opportunities to practice speaking with new vocabulary words or even sharing conversations to promote comprehension. Just as the implementation of the peer mediation program can assist in developing social skills for students, it also gives students the opportunity to practice speaking and reading in a low-risk setting with other peers, who tend to be more comfortable than adults. Because the vocabulary of peer mediation is less formal in nature and is not equivalent to the vocabulary used within a classroom, it allows a scaffolding opportunity for students to comfortably engage in literacy practices that will benefit them within a classroom, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2014).

Brian Cambourne (1984) describes several different conditions of learning, one of which is approximation, which can be likened to Gee's concept of "mushfake," (1989). This is the step when the learner makes an attempt to practice a new skill (often imperfectly) that is in what Lev Vygotsky (1978) would describe as their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is when this sort of speaking practice may benefit students the most, to push them beyond the cusp of almost proficient to actual proficiency. The zone of proximal development is a term used to describe when someone is close to being able to perform a task independently, but may still require some assistance and/or practice (Vygotsky, 1978). In the peer mediation program, students will be allowed to approximate their new Discourse during training sessions with the support and expertise of their teacher. This is what Gee (1989) refers to as an apprenticeship, since the Discourse is being acquired with the guidance of an experienced member of that Discourse. Furthermore, students will also work in pairs to mediate conflicts so they have the support of each other as they engage in the Discourse of conflict resolution. For example, one mediator may have partially acquired the skill of active listening but excels at the skill of suggesting potential solutions to disputants. In a case like this, it would be best to pair this person with another peer mediator who may be good at listening and clarifying but not as creative when it comes to suggesting ways to fix a problem. These social and language-based skills can be cultivated within the Discourse of peer mediation, which will then benefit students as they are also important within the Discourse of school.

Bullying intervention programs

The impact of successful bullying intervention programs will be explored, along with an analysis of which factors contributed to their success. Ken Rigby (2014) conducted a cross-national survey in England, Finland, Australia, the Netherlands, and the United States to compare strategies used to address behavioral issues in the classroom. The ways teachers deal with bullying were categorized into five different fields: direct sanctions, restorative practice, mediation, support group method, and method of shared concern. Of these five strategies, direct sanctions, which is a punishment such as detention or suspension, was found to be the most common. The results of effectiveness of any one method are inconclusive, and further research will need to be conducted to determine if there is a best method, or if it is best to employ a variety of methods. While direct sanctions is the most common form of addressing undesirable student behaviors, this study includes mediation as an acceptable form of bullying prevention, which supports the formation of a peer mediation program as a form of bullying intervention for this study. The other ways of addressing bullying behavior that were included in the study, including restorative practice, support group method, and method of shared concern, are all applicable to the design of peer mediation as well.

In a study conducted by Datta, Cornell, & Huang (2016), survey results established a direct relationship between attitudes and intervention behaviors regarding bullying across schools and on individual levels. They concluded that anti-bullying programs should target the student attitude and norms about bullying, specifically encouraging students to intervene, to be effective. This would require participation of the entire student population, and therefore, a buy-in attitude from the school as a whole.

This allows for key components the school Discourse to be clearly communicated to those who may illiterate in that Discourse and provides a pathway to achieving that Discourse for those who are marginalized, by clearly communicating the expectation of students taking ownership of the bullying issue.

According to Schrupf, Crawford, and Bodine (1997), “If students are able and encouraged to solve their own real problems in the school environment, they will become more accepting of the school’s effort to expand their repertoire of information and skills,” (p. 11). Based on this information, it is plausible that a school-wide program that empowers students to act as leaders would be sustainable and more acceptable to students than punishing bullying behaviors on a case-by-case basis. This lies at the heart of the peer mediation program’s design. By providing marginalized students with a Discourse and protocol for conflict resolution, they will dispel any myths of incompetence that others may have. This peer mediation Discourse and the skills that accompany it will assist students in their transition towards the literacy of the school’s Discourse.

Descriptions and results of other intervention programs. A variety of anti-bullying programs have been tested in schools over the years. One program, titled *It’s Your Game. . . Keep It Real*, was piloted in Texas (Peskin et al., 2014). A comparative intervention study was conducted with ten middle schools: half implemented the interventional program of study and the other half used the state-approved Health textbook as the basis for their program. This program included an explicitly designed curriculum that gave students information about recognizing the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as: “. . .skills-training related to evaluating relationships, peer pressure, and social support; setting personal limits and respecting

others' limits; and recognizing peer norms" (Peskin, et al., 2014, p. 1473). The focus on social skills and recognizing the components of healthy relationships is similar to that of the peer mediation program, since mediators will be trained in ways to recognize and repair social problems. This program required parental consent, so the participation was not mandatory or inclusive of the entire student population, which is also similar in design to the peer mediation intervention.

The *It's Your Game...Keep It Real* program in Texas was found to be successful in reducing incidences of teen dating violence, both physical and emotional in nature (Peskin et al., 2014). While teen dating violence is more specific than bullying, it will be considered a type of bullying for the purpose of this study, since bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behavior towards an individual, and because teen dating violence could also be a type of conflict that peer mediators may encounter during the program. Dating violence also has similar implications as bullying, including putting students at risk for depression and other risky behaviors later in life (Peskin et al., 2014).

KiVa is another notable program, gaining international recognition in recent years. It was started in Finland and has been implemented in several other countries since then. Two notable aspects of this program include that it is implemented school-wide and addresses bystander responses to bullying incidents (Juvonen et al., 2016). In addition, one study indicates that KiVa is helpful in assisting teachers to better understand how to address bullying behaviors, suggesting that teacher training is a key component to a successful program (Ahtola et al., 2012). KiVa has been found to be effective at helping teachers address bullying behaviors (Ahtola et al., 2012). It is also effective at reducing bullying incidences and improving school climate (Juvonen et al., 2016). Furthermore,

Juvonen et al. (2016) found that implementing a school-wide program reduces the negative impact of those victimized by bullying by fostering a more supportive and proactive environment. In other words, it stands to reason that many of the negative impacts of bullying will be reduced if the bullying itself is successfully prevented in schools, which is the overarching goal of implementing an intervention focused on conflict-resolution, such as the peer mediation program.

Another approach taken to address bullying behaviors is the “Quality Circle” approach, which was studied by Paul, Smith, and Blumberg (2010) to combat cyberbullying in schools in the United Kingdom. This approach involves a student-led group that identifies relevant problems within the school and develops solutions to share with the rest of the student population. An academy serving approximately 900 students was studied to examine the impact of a cyberbullying intervention program. The students were able to report data to an electronic database in exchange for an online reward system for behavior modification. Thirty-two students were selected to participate in the Quality Circle program to address cyberbullying for a period of 12 weeks. Students were split into groups and each group proposed at least three project ideas for improving the school climate and addressing the bullying issues. The feedback from students and staff regarding Quality Circles was positive, although it can be difficult to determine the impact of something that is meant to be preventative. The Quality Circle approach is similar to the design of the peer mediation program because it is student-led when it comes to identifying school problems and addressing them.

These programs all show promise in a variety of factors, such as reducing violence and bullying (Ahtola et al., 2012; Juvonen et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2014).

Some key contributions to their success include implementing the program school-wide, providing teachers with alternatives to directly punishing bullying behavior, and giving students opportunities to lead (Ahtola et al., 2012; Juvonen et al, 2016; Paul, Smith, & Blumburg, 2010). These are the key elements that will be utilized in the design of the peer mediation program outlined in this dissertation to prevent bullying. The teacher-researcher plans on implementing the program and making the service of mediation available to all grade levels at Westchester Middle School, and providing all students, especially those who need help learning the Discourse of school, with an opportunity to become leaders and practice that Discourse.

History of Peer Mediation programs

Peer mediation is a relatively new concept in the realm of American education, making its debut in the early 1990s (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Burnett, 1992). This section will explore the types of issues addressed in peer mediation over the years, criticisms of peer mediation, and why some schools choose to continue or discontinue the programs.

In 1992, an article titled “Teaching Students to be Peer Mediators” was published by Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Burnett. It began by illustrating the following problem:

Discipline problems plague classrooms and schools. Students bicker, threaten, tease, and harass one another. Conflicts involving racial and cultural differences are increasing. Truancy is epidemic. Violence is escalating. Generally, conflicts among students and between students and staff occur with frequency and consume considerable teacher and administrator time (p. 10).

Peer mediation is a term used to describe conflict resolution programs that involve training students to mediate conflicts between other students in a nonviolent manner (Johnson et al., 1992). Despite the age of this article, the above issue is still a severe problem that plagues the schools of the United States. In fact, it may potentially be worse due to the dawn of the internet, and therefore, cyberbullying (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2010). When students are given the space and time to solve their own problems, it can be theorized that less distractions are impeding their academic success during class. Richard Cohen (2005) states, “The impact that student conflict has upon the educational process—from time on task to academic achievement to staff morale—is undeniable” (p. 3). This statement illustrates why the Discourse of peer mediation as a vehicle to school Discourse is so vital to both the peer mediators and the others they serve—because conflict is unarguably a barrier to the learning process.

Changes in peer mediation over the last 25 years. According to Don Sorenson (1992), “Mediation is the process of intervening in the lives of others to help them resolve conflicts” (p. 83). It would follow, then, that peer mediation is the process of a peer performing such an intervention. When examining the history of peer mediation programs in the United States, Gilhooley and Scheuch (2000) focus on schools located in Pennsylvania and note that the first peer mediation programs appeared in 1993. This date is consistent when examining the oldest research on the topic to use the term “peer mediator,” which appeared in 1992 (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Burnett), although others such as Sorenson (1992) wrote about similar concepts without the exact same terminology. Before this time, research leading to the topic of peer mediation was referred to more broadly as “conflict resolution” (Greenawald & Johnson, 1987; Lam,

1989; Kaufman, 1992). Gilhooley and Scheuch (2000) also note that the peer mediation program was implemented in response to "...the growing number of arguments, fights, and name calling incidents that were disrupting the educational process," (p. 4). This rationale is virtually identical to the above problem of practice, which affirms the teacher-researcher's decision to pursue peer mediation as an intervention to the problem.

A paper that was presented at the National Youth At-Risk Conference in Savannah, Georgia titled "*Don't Hate—Peer Mediate!*" *Teaching Students to say YES to Non-Violent Conflict Resolution* (Lee & Williamson, 2015) outlined research about student opinions regarding peer mediation programs, finding that most are satisfied with the outcomes and believe that mediators act in a fair manner. The rationale they provide for implementing peer mediation is to reduce the amount of disciplinary actions on an administrative level from the school, which often leads to lower high school graduation rates (Lee & Williamson, 2015). Westchester Middle School has found that a disproportionate amount of the marginalized students of Team Falcon are given discipline referrals, and one goal of the peer mediation program is to reduce the amount of referrals overall.

When discussing peer mediation programs in schools, Schrupf, Crawford, & Bodine (1997) state, "Schools have rarely dropped the program due to lack of success, and most report some improvement in overall school climate based upon reduction in suspensions, fights, verbal attacks, property disputes, and so forth when peer mediation is available" (p. xiv). However, there does not appear to be a significant amount of data available to support these claims.

However, one study, conducted by Deborah McKay (2007), indicated that there is a positive relationship between a middle school peer mediation program and teacher perception of bullying behavior, as well as school climate. She found slight improvement in other dimensions, such as perception of victims and school witnesses, that were measured using quantitative and qualitative methods, but not enough to be considered statistically significant. The construct of school climate will be reflected within the case studies presented about the Westchester Middle School peer mediation program.

While these studies and texts span over a long period of time, it seems the process of peer mediation has not changed much in the last 25 years and may remain unchanged. Essentially, students are trained to resolve conflicts and work through a very specific set of steps to help disputants find a solution, as will be the practice employed at Westchester Middle School. The implementation of these programs is dwindling due to a variety of reasons, including lack of empirical evidence for effectiveness, being too time-consuming, and not being cost-effective (Webster, 1993). The most significant change in the last few decades has been the development of the internet, and therefore, cyberbullying, making the act of bullying a more widespread problem than ever before (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2010). However, the introduction of the internet may also provide digital training materials for students to use, making a peer mediation program cost-efficient without the need to purchase hard copies of materials. Westchester Middle School provides Chromebooks to all of its students, therefore some of the materials may be made available online to reduce implementation costs.

To illustrate another point of change, Dennis Carlson (2017) states that there is currently an increase in the reports of bullying incidents due to another reason reflective

of society. He continues, “This is related to the fact that as more LGBTQ youth are ‘out’ in their schools, they are more likely to stand up for their rights, and are more visible targets of bullying,” (Carlson, 2017, p. 337). Carlson (2017) also argues that the increase of bullying may be a residual effect of political rhetoric in the post 9-11 era, resulting in targeting certain ethnic and racial groups to blame for society’s problems. This trend is continuing and impacts many immigrant families, including those in the population of the study. One of the peer mediators of this study, for example, has “come out” as bisexual, and she, along with another peer mediator, are taking steps toward creating a LGBTQ+ group for the school to advocate against the bullying of that population. The peer mediation program is a safe, inclusive platform for marginalized students to discuss these issues and make their voices heard when it comes to anti-bullying efforts. This is one way that a student’s Discourse can be expanded and practiced as they explore new facets of their identities.

Overall, the peer mediation process has not changed but the types of issues and reasons behind bullying behaviors have evolved with society. Schools are more likely to implement anti-bullying programs now that it has been established as such a widespread problem (Carlson, 2017). The varying reasons behind bullying and the way students bully each other, such as cyber bullying, remain relevant to the curriculum of the program and such issues should be included in the training materials to those who design it (Cohen, 2005). The peer mediation program design outlined in this dissertation aims to provide an opportunity for students to practice a secondary Discourse, as well as empower marginalized students to serve as leaders in their school in a way that will carry over to the Discourse of school.

Steps to implementing a peer mediation program

The general process of starting a peer mediation program is relatively straightforward but requires a great deal of planning and gathering of resources. To make any sort of school-wide change, several considerations need to be made. According to Cohen (2005), these principles of change include starting with the needs of the school, gaining support of school leaders, encouraging participation of all school community members, working with the whole school as a system, thinking long-term, and understanding that change is an ongoing process. These principles of change are a springboard for thinking about the different steps that need to be taken in order to implement a program such as peer mediation, which include (Cohen 2005):

1. Propose idea and gain approval
2. Design program
3. Train and educate school population
4. Select and train peer mediators
5. Implement the program
6. Reflection and monitoring

Methodologies

The teacher-researcher is conducting an action research study which involves both qualitative and quantitative elements. The quantitative elements include attendance data, discipline referrals, and visits to the guidance counselor to report bullying or conflict. The qualitative elements will include teacher anecdotal notes and interviews of students. Action research is a cyclical process which involves gathering information, planning, implementing the action plan, and then reflecting (Mertler, 2014). This is a cyclical process that is continuous, allowing for improvement in one's practice over time.

Most of the information gathered from this action research project will be qualitative; and is therefore presented in the form of case studies. Pinar (2017) describes a reconceptualist-oriented case study in which the work is laden with the researcher's values and contains a "politically emancipatory intent" (p. 171). This is descriptive of the intentions of the teacher-researcher and how the information will be organized. It is the goal to empower the marginalized students of Team Falcon in a way helps them negotiate and rise above some of their obstacles set before them by the school system.

Conclusion

When examining the issues of bullying and creating a peer mediation program as an intervention, several different topics were explored, including Discourse as the theoretical lens, the bullying issue itself, tracking, and the structure of successful anti-bullying and peer mediation programs. The population of study consists mostly of students who struggle with the literacy of school Discourse, marginalized because of their intentional placement on one team due to the practice of tracking.

The Discourse of a student serves as an identity toolkit, which includes actions, values, and words that students use intentionally depending on the context of a situation (Gee, 1987; 1989). Each person has webs of association (Gee, 2014) that play into constructing the particular actions, values, and words that come into play in a given situation, such as that of being a peer mediator with the intention of resolving a conflict. By providing students with a secondary Discourse through the peer mediation program, they are being scaffolded toward the Discourse of school to aid in their academic success. To successfully create a Discourse within the school, students will be provided training that is inclusive of appropriate vocabulary for conflict resolution, actions for active

listening, and protocols for reporting red flag items to counselors, which will create an identifiable *who* and *what* of peer mediation (Gee, 2014.)

The literature suggests that the long-term effects of bullying can be detrimental to mental health and/or academics (Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Cutbush, Williams, & Miller, 2016; Datta, Cornell, & Huang, 2016; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014; Juvonen et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2014; Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2017). Considering, it would be in the school's best interest to invest the time and resources into a bullying intervention program to benefit the students of Team Falcon, as well as other stakeholders in the learning community.

The different bullying prevention programs examined had a variety of approaches, all with the goal of reducing bullying and improving school climate, which is interrelated to the Discourse of the school (Cutbush, Williams, & Miller, 2016; Datta, Cornell, & Huang, 2016; Peskin et al., 2014; Peterson & Skiba, 2000; Rigby, 2014). Before bullying became a hot topic in education, some studies examined the aspect of conflict resolution, with very similar goals of improving school climate (Kaufman, 1992; Lam, 1989). The KiVa program, which originated in Finland, has recently gained international attention due to its effectiveness in improving school climate and teacher outlook (Ahtola et al., 2012; Juvonen et al., 2016).

Peer mediation programs as a form of bullying prevention were explored. Peer mediation and other conflict resolution programs started appearing in schools during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Greenawald & Johnson, 1987; Johnson et al., 1992; Sorenson, 1992). While they have not exactly gone away, peer mediation programs have lost their popularity over the years, for reasons unknown. Although most of the literature

claims they are effective and have high success rates at resolving conflicts, it is likely that they require a lot of extra time and effort to maintain (Cohen, 2005; Gilhooley & Scheuch, 2000; Harris, 2005; Lee & Williamson, 2015; Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). Due to their success stories, the teacher-researcher will explore ways to incorporate peer mediation, inclusive of a Discourse that is scaffolded somewhere between that of school and the home, and other elements of successful anti-bullying programs into the research design.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Design of Peer Mediation Program

Before reviewing the design of the overall study, the details of the peer mediation program for this study will be outlined here:

Propose idea and gain approval. The administrators of a school would need to approve of any sort of idea that may impact their whole student and teaching population. Cohen (2005) and Schrupf, Crawford, and Bodine (1997) suggest starting by showing an administrator and other school leaders how a peer mediation program addresses a school-wide problem, such as bullying or violence. This step may require some research demonstrating success of the program in other schools (McKay, 2007; Schrupf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997; Cohen, 2005; Lee & Williamson, 2015). It may also involve having a plan in place for securing funds for the new program, as they are not often readily available (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). Funding may cover the cost of training materials, however, there are some free manuals available online.

Design program. Whoever chooses to implement the program at a school will be referred to here as the facilitator. This can be a teacher, counselor, parent volunteer, or any other community adult who is able and willing to oversee the program. The facilitator or team of facilitators for the peer mediation program will need to decide what policies and procedures to adopt for the program, along with any other ground rules they would like to establish for maintenance (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). Other

considerations for the design of the program will include listing which resources will be required (such as people to help, time, space for training and mediation sessions), deciding how to select students as peer mediators, how to present and promote the program to teachers and students, what kind of training materials and methods to use, establishing and maintaining a funding source, and how to collect data for program improvement (Cohen, 2005; Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997).

The teacher researcher began this process by gaining approval to conduct research from the principal by submitting a copy of the Internal Review Board (IRB) application, which outlines the design and goals of the study. This particular program will include the option to participate and train as Peer Leaders being made available to only Team Falcon students, although any student at the school can participate in the peer mediation process if they have a conflict to resolve. Parent consent forms (Appendix B) will be sent home with students who are interested in participating in the program. Students will then train as Peer Leaders over a period of a three weeks before beginning to accept peer mediation cases.

Train and educate school population. Cohen (2005) suggests that showing a demonstration of the peer mediation process as being one of the most effective ways to generate interest and help people understand how it works. Staff members will need to know some essential aspects of the program, such as when mediations can occur, how to refer someone for mediation, and what sorts of situations are not appropriate for peer mediation (Cohen, 2005; Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). Schrumpf, Crawford, and Bodine (1997) suggest hosting a school assembly or delivering in-class presentations similar to the staff training to help educate students about the peer mediation program and

how to effectively use it. These presentations may include role playing acted out by peer mediators or facilitators, demonstrating how a session may look. The presentation may either be live or recorded as a video to save time. This can serve as a way to raise awareness about the program and communicate the opportunity for students to volunteer as peer mediators for the school (Cohen, 2005; Schrupf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997).

For most peer mediation programs, the process is about the same. Students are trained to resolve conflicts, they review ground rules, and help disputants reach an agreement. The most significant variation between programs is the training materials. The teacher-researcher of this program created her own manual, which is tailored to fit the needs of her own community (Van Hassel, 2018). Most of this manual is adapted from Don Sorenson's *Conflict Resolution and Mediation for Peer Helpers* (1992). This text was selected as a basis for the training materials due to the presentation of concepts through storytelling, as well as the easier reading level when compared with other texts, such as Schrupf, Crawford, and Bodine's *Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools: Program Guide* (1997), which involves a 15-step mediation program and is written on a more difficult reading level.

To create this new manual, the teacher-researcher simplified much of the text and created new examples inclusive of language that may be more aligned to the primary Discourse of many students. For example, there is a table of "Unpleasant Feelings Words," (p. 36) and "Pleasant Feelings Words," (p. 36) in Sorenson's Program Guide that include some words that may be unfamiliar to the student population of this study. Some examples include "Maudlin," "Melancholy," and "Ambivalent," (Sorenson, p. 36). Rather than two lists of already labeled words, the teacher-researcher created one list of

feelings words and allowed students to discuss some of the ambiguities and connotations that can come along with certain emotions, such as “bold,” (Van Hassel, p. 12), for example. In an attempt to position the vocabulary of the text closer to the primary Discourse of the students, the teacher-researcher created this new vocabulary list of “feelings” that was shorter and more middle-school appropriate. Other adjustments and variations from Sorenson’s (1992) manual include the use of acronyms to aid in memorization of procedures for active listening, the addition of a chapter about “red flag” topics that should be reported immediately to a counselor, and a chapter of unique scenarios for students to use as role-playing opportunities to practice utilizing the process of mediation.

Select and train peer mediators. Peer mediators are to be selected by whatever process has been determined by the group of facilitators. Gilhooley and Scheuch (2000) suggest making applications available to students immediately after presenting peer mediation information to them. Cohen (2005) suggests taking nominations from teachers, partially to ensure that peer mediators are representative of a variety of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and academic abilities within the school, and not just the higher achievers. It is also possible to accept nominations from other students, but it is important to preserve the aspect of choice and buy-in. The program will not succeed if people are forced to participate. Once the mediators are selected, they will be trained by the facilitators to understand the nature of conflicts, how to resolve conflicts peacefully, and the mediation process (Cohen, 2005; Schrupf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997; Sorenson, 1992).

At Westchester Middle, students will be selected to participate on a volunteer basis. The opportunity was advertised to the students of Team Falcon by a flyer advertising an interest meeting (Appendix A). The requirements include filling out a brief application (Appendix C) and gaining teacher recommendations (Appendix D) to participate in the program. Once the students are selected and return parent consent forms (Appendix B), they will be trained during study hall time over a period of four weeks, meeting for approximately 30 minutes, twice a week, totaling 4 hours of training time. During training, students are introduced to the process of mediation, first by reading examples in the manual created by the teacher-researcher (Van Hassel, 2018) and then by watching a demonstrative video about how it works. Toward the end of the training process students are required to practice active listening and mediation skills by role playing imaginary conflicts, taking turns as being both disputants and mediators. During this process, students are also taught how to spot “red flags” worthy of reporting to adults. These “red flags” include signs of abuse, suicide, illegal drug use, weapon possession, or anything else that should be handled by adults (Sorenson, 1992; Van Hassel, 2018). All of these skills are vital pieces of the Discourse of peer mediation.

Implement the program. Once mediators are fully trained to resolve conflicts, the program can begin accepting cases from the school population. Mediators are considered fully trained when they have completed reading the manual (Van Hassel, 2018) have completed role playing through a conflict, and have taken an assessment reviewing material covered within the manual (Appendix J). Cohen (2005) suggests scheduling regular meetings for peer mediators throughout the year so they can meet with the facilitator team and troubleshoot any issues that may arise throughout the year, as

well as serve as an open line of communication within the peer mediator community. Students will follow protocols put in place to mediate cases and provide follow up to ensure the program is serving the student population effectively (Cohen, 2005).

At Westchester Middle School, the peer mediators are will be encouraged to spread information to their peers about the program. The teacher-researcher will work with the peer mediators to create commercial videos advertising and explaining the process of peer mediation, and the school media specialist will create a subpage on the school website specifically for the peer mediation program. Teachers, administrators, and counselors will be reminded that they can refer students for mediation cases via the form posted on the peer mediation page on the school website (Appendix F) if they think it may be helpful to the students they serve.

Reflection/Monitoring. By meeting on a regular basis, this allows for the reflection process to take place between the facilitators and the students. Satisfaction forms can be given to participants in order to evaluate the program and look for ways to make improvements or changes (Cohen, 2005; Schrupf, Crawford, and Bodine, 1997). Facilitators can document successes and potentially plan for expansion of the program into other schools for the following school year, or even note any policy changes they would like to make for the following year (Cohen, 2005). The reflection and maintenance of the program is vital to keep it continuing year after year (Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). This step is also congruent to the final step of action research, which is further described below.

At the research site, specifically in the classroom of the teacher-researcher, the student-participants and the teacher-researcher will meet on a weekly basis to discuss any

difficult cases, along with feedback given to the group from disputants via the Peer Mediation Feedback survey (Appendix E). This information may serve as a springboard for students to discuss any challenges they face as peer mediators and work together to create a plan for improving their practice moving forward.

Mediation Process. When students recognize that they have a conflict they would like help resolving, they can fill out an online request form for mediation (Appendix F). The facilitator/teacher-researcher may then assign two mediators to the case (on a rotating basis to ensure that everyone gets an even amount of cases and gets to work with different partners). During study hall or lunch time, the mediators are given a hall pass and may locate the disputants to confirm with both parties that they are willing to participate in mediation. If one party is not wanting to participate, then the process ends. If both disputants desire to participate in mediation, they may be escorted to the media center (or separate cafeteria table if it is lunch time) where the mediation will occur.

During the mediation, both mediators review the ground rules (Appendix G) with each disputant to clarify that each party will be listened to and not interrupted and that both parties are actively seeking a solution to their problem. Once each disputant has given their side of the story, the mediators may repeat key points back to the disputants to ensure clarity and understanding. Then the mediators will ask disputants to brainstorm solutions to the problem, only volunteering suggestions if disputants are at a loss for ideas or if they ask for help. Once a solution has been suggested and agreed upon by both parties, and agreement is drafted and signed by everyone who participated in the session. An anonymous follow up survey may later be given to the disputants to gain feedback on their experience and the performance of the Peer Leaders. This process is reflective of the

Discourse of peer mediation, including the belief that everyone's voice is valued and should be heard, the actions of active listening, and the vocabulary of positive encouragement as they help disputants find solutions to their problems.

Action Research

It is generally agreed upon throughout the literature that peer mediation programs are successful in helping students resolve conflicts, but there are few studies showing quantitative data to support these claims (Harris, 2005). In McKay's study, it is concluded that the most significant impact a peer mediation program had on the studied influences of school climate was in the area of teacher outlook (2007). While this is not the same as proving that peer mediation prevents violent student behavior (which is difficult to prove anyway), it is important to consider the factor of school climate or culture since it has an impact on teaching and learning (McKay, 2007).

Action research is the chosen method for this study, to closely examine the student population working with the teacher-researcher, so that an immediate improvement can be made to the learning environment at the research site (Mertler, 2014). Within the action research study, there will be both qualitative and quantitative elements of data, which categorizes the study as mixed-methods. Action research is an ongoing process (Mertler, 2014), so the beginnings of the process are described within this chapter, and the plans for future action to be taken after the first cycle of study will occur in Chapter Five.

Role of the Teacher-researcher

The teacher-researcher is a 7th grade English Language Arts and Social Studies teacher for Team Falcon. This is her 7th school year as a teacher, but her first in this

particular setting. The teacher-researcher has designed the peer mediation program to be implemented and currently serves as the facilitator of the program.

Research Context

Student-Participants. The pool of student-participants will include the entire 7th grade at Westchester Middle School for participating in peer mediation sessions, and only Team Falcon for the treatment of being provided the opportunity to train as peer mediators. Team Falcon consists of 66 students, including the majority of the students in the 7th grade who receive special education services. The team is classified as 60% male and 40% female, with approximately 17% identifying as Native American Indian, 40% African American, 35% as Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 5% mixed race. Approximately 26% students receive special education services, and 90% of this team scored below grade level on the STAR reading assessment administered at the beginning of the school year.

In comparison with the rest of the school, the demographics of Team Falcon are close to being representative of the population as a whole: being 53% male, 47% female, 13% Native American, 1% Asian, 42% African American, 37% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, and 5% mixed race (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In contrast, there is a large discrepancy of the demographics from the STEM team, which is 49% male, 51% female, 8.5% Native American, 17% African American, 66% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 5.5% mixed race, which is therefore not proportionately representative of the rest of the school population due to its predominantly White population. This comparison is being made to demonstrate the marginalization of Team Falcon and support the posit that White families tend to utilize a primary Discourse that is very aligned with the Discourse

of school (Heath, 1983). The varying demographics of each team is outlined in Figure 3.1 below:

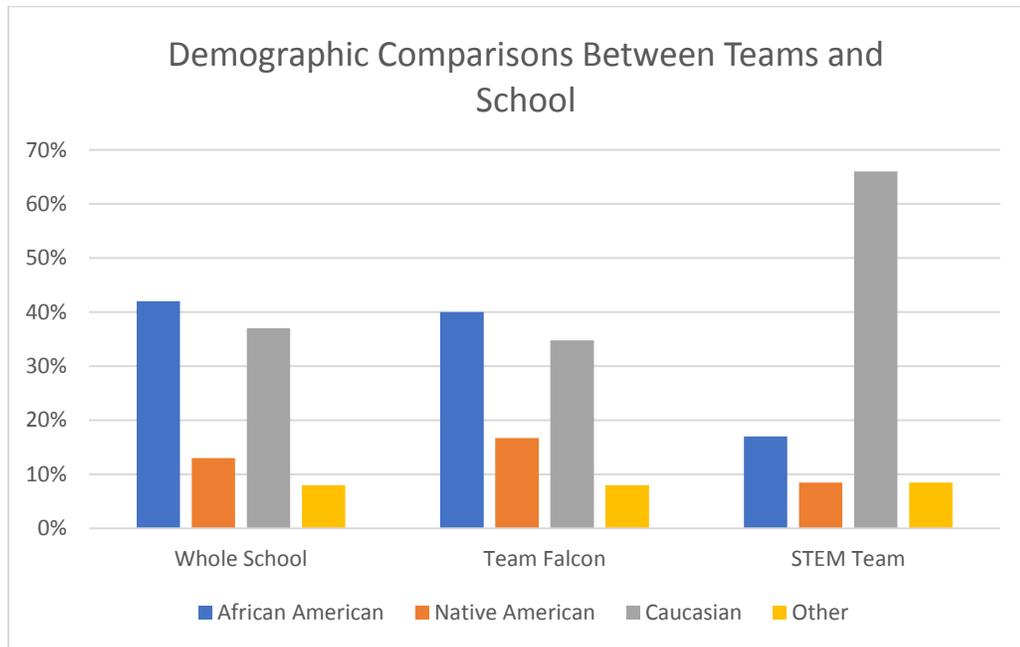


Figure 3.1- Demographic Comparisons Between Teams and School

Of the ten participants who volunteered to train as peer mediators, there are six girls and four boys. Five of the peer mediators are African American, three are Native American Indian, and two are Caucasian. Two of the peer mediators are identified as requiring special education services: one for autism and the other for specific learning disability in the area of reading. Of these students, only one scored close to grade level for reading on the STAR assessment administered at the beginning of the school year. The ranges of scores from this group span from the grade level equivalent of 2.8-6.8, as is illustrated in the chart. The majority of these students struggle with reading and are at least two grade levels below their current grade of enrollment. Many also struggle with becoming proficient with the secondary Discourse of school, which Gee (1987) describes as literacy.

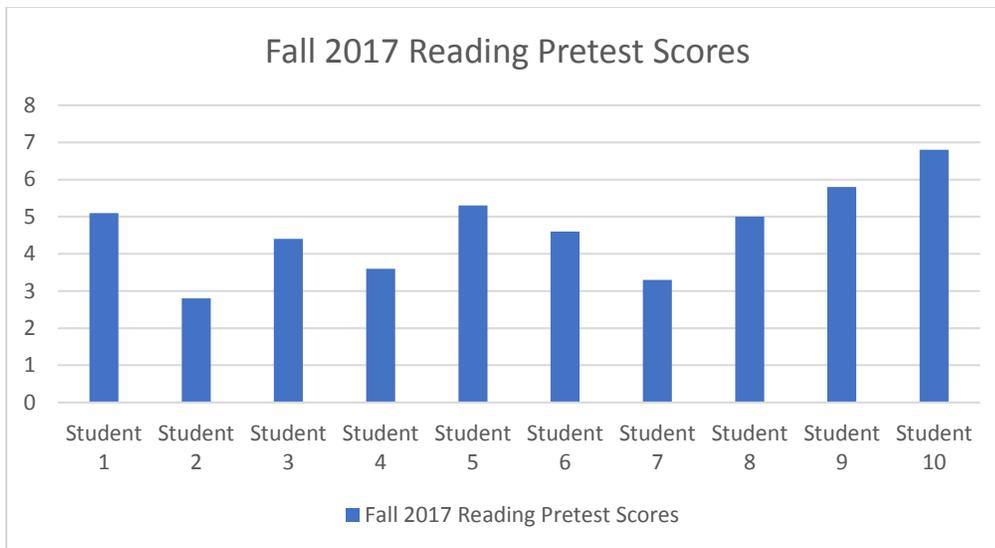


Figure 3.2 Fall 2017 Reading Pretest Scores

Of the ten students who trained to become peer mediators, one was in a physical fight when she was in the 6th grade, a year prior to the creation of the peer mediation program. One of the other peer mediators had a minor referral the previous school year for disrespect, but the remaining eight had a clear discipline record for that school year. The following pseudonyms have been assigned to the students who trained to become peer mediators: Christopher, Juan, Joseph, Clark, Helen, Anne, Nancy, Baina, Diane, and Bella.

Research Site. Westchester Middle school is located in Ireland county, NC, a rural community approximately one hour outside of the Fayetteville, NC. Ireland county is home to approximately 35,093 people, identifying as 45.7% white, 39.1% African American, 11.8% American Indian, 1% Asian, 2.5% mixed, and 2.9% Hispanic (Census, 2017). When comparing the data from the town to the data of Team Falcon, it can be concluded that the team is not congruently representative of the greater community's demographics, likely due to the practice of tracking and the partial racial and cultural

segregation that comes as a result. The demographics of the STEM team is also not proportionally representative of the overall population of the county, containing more students who identify as Caucasian than Team Falcon, supporting the claim that White students are systemically at an advantage at school due to their aligned primary Discourse (Heath, 1983).

Action Research Validity

Action research is considered valid due to the social nature of the field of education. Since it involves studying people, typically of the younger variety, there are many variables within the population of study. As children grow and change, it can be difficult to detect patterns or draw conclusions about the population as a whole. Action research is designed to consider a specific classroom environment, which contains the context of a group of students, their instructor, and whatever subject matter is being addressed. One student may behave better during math class than during reading class due to ability level (Allen & Gonzalez, 1996). When the classroom environment is examined as a whole, the conclusions drawn will apply only to that one environment (Mertler, 2014). A teacher-researcher must make careful considerations to ensure that quantitative data is not misinterpreted or misused to the detriment of children.

This specificity means that action research is truly tailored to teaching and learning, which makes an ideal form of study for teacher-researchers.

Design of the Study

There are different phases involved in implementing action research, which include planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2014). These stages are

cyclical and can be repeated many times throughout a study as goals and foci are adjusted based on the frequent practice of gathering more information.

Planning. The initial planning phase of this study involves behavioral observations in the school setting. The Problem of Practice was identified by fielding teachers' concerns within the context of casual conversations, specifically about the problematic behaviors of the students on Team Falcon at Westchester Middle School. The students have noticed racial disparity between teams, and the teachers have expressed concern over the self-esteem of the students, theorizing a potential connection between low self-esteem, lack of success with the Discourse of school, and the large numbers of interpersonal conflicts among the students. A preliminary literature review was conducted involving peer mediation as a potential solution to the interpersonal conflicts, constructivism, and the effects of teaming in the context of culturally responsive pedagogy. Based on the problem of practice, the teacher-researcher created the objective of creating a secondary Discourse for the student-participants as an opportunity for leadership to dispel any negative associations with their tracking placement, as well as serve as a bridge to the Discourse of school.

Research objectives. The first objective in this study will be to assess the construct of literacy achievement of school Discourse, as defined by Gee (1987) through teacher interviews, observations, and data collection. The second objective of the study will be to successfully implement a peer mediation program at Westchester Middle School. The third, and ultimate, objective will be to reevaluate the literacy achievement to determine if there are any significant changes as a result of the peer mediation intervention, comparing any correlation between the variables.

Evolution of the research focus. At first the teacher-researcher's topic of study involved literacy with English Language Learners (ELL), because the original research site served a large ELL population. Later, the researcher relocated to a different setting where the student population did not contain a significant amount of ELL students. However, the repeated incidents of conflicts between the students within the classroom soon presented itself as a universal, more urgent problem that needs to be addressed in many schools. Mertler (2014) encourages teachers to utilize action research because, "It focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action must be taken" (p. 4). As the interpersonal conflicts continued to arise in the new setting, it became clear that the action must be taken to help students with conflict resolution skills before entertaining the idea of increasing their reading levels or focusing on some aspect that is purely academic, as this issue is more urgent to the safety and mental well-being of the students, which must be addressed first. This is a way to enhance the students' aptitude in the Discourse of school in way that is different from their previous experiences, since a peer mediation program has not been implemented at the research site prior to this study.

Development of the research plan. The teacher interviews (Appendix H) were later added to address the fact that just having the numbers of suspensions is limiting, due to the variety of infractions for which students are routinely suspended, including some that are not resolvable through conflict resolution practices, such as vandalism or drug use, for example. Mertler (2014) encourages the use of common sense within action research, because looking at raw data without considering these possibilities of what it actually represents may result in drawing incorrect conclusions. The teacher-researcher

will compile the results of the teacher interviews, student surveys, STAR reading assessment scores, and behavior referrals to search for any significant changes or patterns in behaviors of the students.

Hypotheses. The teacher-researcher determined the following hypotheses based on the variables of the study: The variables of this study include the independent variable, the peer mediation program, and the dependent variables of self-esteem, academic achievement, and student behavior. The null hypothesis of this study is that there may be no relationship shown between a peer mediation program and the constructs student Discourse. The alternative hypothesis is that students who participate in the peer mediation program will demonstrate a difference in the areas their Discourse. Each student will be observed as they navigate the challenges and experiences of participating in the peer mediation program.

Ethical Considerations. To gain permissions for the research, the school principal was contacted and given a copy of the IRB application for review. The teacher-researcher was formally granted permission to conduct research in December of 2017. In addition to gaining proper permissions, the teacher-researcher will strive to maintain student confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the students, school, and town where the school is located within the dissertation. All students involved in the study will be fully informed of their role in it, and parents will be sent consent forms (Appendix B) regarding student participation as a peer mediator at the school.

The teacher-researcher plans to retrieve permission forms from the parents of all students participating as peer mediators before the study is to take place. Explanations in both English and Spanish will be sent home, due to the large Spanish-speaking

population at the school, to ensure that everyone is equally informed of the study. Students will be allowed to participate on different levels in the peer mediation program, all of which are optional. Peer mediators will sign up for training after school hours, and participants in mediation will not be required to participate.

When addressing ethics, Dana & Yendol-Hoppey (2014) state, “Engagement in teacher inquiry as a form of professional development simply makes the normal, everyday work of teaching less happenstance and more visible, heightening the opportunity for teachers to improve learning conditions in their classrooms on a regular basis” (p. 149). When the goal of action research is to improve the classroom, it may almost seem unethical to not constantly conduct research in the field of education. In the case of peer mediation, the aim is to improve learning conditions, peacefully resolve conflict among students, and reduce the workload for the administrators, so it seems that many groups will benefit.

Acting. To implement the program, the teacher-researcher will provide information to the students regarding the peer mediation program, advertising it as a leadership opportunity. The teacher-researcher will present information about mediation services to the school at the beginning of the year at a school-wide assembly. She will teach students the process of referring someone else to peer mediation and let them know when it is appropriate to do so, and when it may be more appropriate to report someone to an administrator (in the event of violence or drug use).

Only students from Team Falcon will be trained as peer mediators at the start of the program, although students from other teams and grade levels will be permitted to participate in the mediation services. Feedback will be collected from the peer mediators

from Team Falcon as well as students who have used the service, in the form of satisfaction surveys and interviews. Reflecting upon the action research process is a vital step for the teacher-researcher to make important changes to their methods to continue improving practice in the future (Mertler, 2014, Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). After the program is implemented with the 7th grade, adjustments can be made by the teacher-researcher and the program can be expanded to other grade levels in subsequent years.

Sample. The entire 7th grade will be able to utilize the peer mediation program, and it can potentially involve teachers or students from other grade levels. A total of ten 7th graders from Team Falcon will be selected and trained as mediators on a volunteer basis.

Data collection. Team Falcon currently has a significantly higher amount of behavioral issues when compared with the STEM team in 7th grade, as evidenced by the amount of suspensions, referrals, and teachers' opinions. Behavioral issues will be compared before the intervention of a peer mediation program, and after a 9-week period of its implementation. This data will be collected in the format of student surveys, anecdotal notes, and review of office referrals of the student-participants. These pieces of information will be intertwined into the stories conveyed as case studies in Chapter Four.

The quantitative data included in this study is in the form of STAR reading assessment data, which is administered at least twice a year. The pre-test is given in the fall and the post-test is given in the spring of each school year at Westchester Middle School. The scores of Team Falcon will be compared to that of the student-participants in the peer mediation program.

The qualitative element of this study will also examine student behavior via teacher interviews (Appendix H), assessing their opinions regarding the types of

disruptions that occur in the class, and if they observe students utilizing the peer mediation program as a form of conflict resolution. The teacher-researcher will then compile this information, in addition to her own observations noted throughout the implementation of the program, to construct a series of case studies featuring a few of the students involved in the peer mediation program.

Developing. Mertler (2014) describes the next phase of action research as developing. After initial data is collected, the teacher-researcher may choose to make a few changes to improve practice or conditions of the study. The teacher-researcher will send student-participants an End-of-Year Survey (Appendix I) to collect information for this step in the process. This information will inform all of the changes described in the Action Plan in Chapter Five that will occur in the second year of the program's implementation. The data collected will also serve as a starting point for the next step in the process, reflecting.

Reflecting. The initial reflections of the study are about potential limitations. The implications of this study will be limited due to the small sample size, so similar studies may be expanded to other grade levels as the action research process progresses. The initial phase of the study will only be conducted with one grade level of students, including 200 students in the 7th grade. Another limitation of this study is time. It is unknown if there is an ideal amount of time to wait to see a significant difference in self-esteem or behavioral issues. If this study is repeated next year, it may be difficult to gain a baseline of behavioral issues with the incoming grade level unless the peer mediation is intentionally withheld for the same period of time, approximately one semester, which in this case may seem unethical. However, baseline information may be attained from the

previous year's information if it is made available to the teacher-researcher. In McKay's study of similar dimensions, no significant quantitative changes are made after a yearlong study, so it may be beneficial to extend the study to a longer time period, following one cohort of students for several years. She does note, however, that the dimension of teacher outlook/opinion does make a significant shift after implementing a peer mediation program (2007).

Conclusion

Due to the practice of tracking at Westchester Middle School, one team of students (Team Falcon) is marginalized. These students are targets of teasing about intellectual ability by both students on the other teams and one another. Many of the bullying instances are resulting in physical assault between the students, which may be a result of the frustration that occurs when students primary Discourse is not aligned to the Discourse of school, resulting in a lack of literacy. To address these issues which are interfering with the learning environment, and ultimately, academic achievement, a study will be conducted following the action research methodology outlined in Craig Mertler's (2014) text: *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators*. A peer mediation program will be implemented to empower the students on Team Falcon and educate them in ways to resolve conflicts without violence in a way that is agreeable to all parties involved.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction- Peer Mediation in Action

“Where is Cindy?” I asked as the other students filed into my classroom. “She got in a fight on the bus this morning,” Randy replied. “Sarah was talking trash about her mama, and Cindy jumped her.”

I sat back in my chair and shook my head. Cindy and Sarah were both students of mine, and they were both close friends before this incident occurred. Cindy is a very sociable, extroverted child. She is a cheerleader for the school and is quite mature for her age. She often has conversations with her teachers about things beyond academics and is generally likable by both adults and other children. Her Discourse is usually well-aligned with school. She understands the behaviors expected of her and speaks to adults in a way that mimics how adults speak. As an only child, she often finds herself in the company of adults rather than children, and it appears that those adults promote a Discourse that transfers well into school.

Sarah, however, has a different Discourse than Cindy, and typically finds herself being reprimanded for impulsive actions, such as doodling on school property, not walking in a straight line during transitions and blurting out to contribute to classroom conversations without raising her hand. Sarah, while she can be difficult in the classroom at times, is not generally a malicious person, so her altercation with Cindy may have been a result of speaking without first thinking, as middle schoolers can do at times.

It sounded like a case for peer mediation. After their two-week long suspension was served, I approached Cindy to ask her if she was interested. “I don’t know if I want to. We haven’t been talking to each other. Things are awkward,” Cindy told me.

“I understand. Remember, we will never force you or her into a mediation if you’re not comfortable, but would you like me to ask her if she’s interested?”

After a moment of thought, Cindy nodded her head and said, “Yeah. Maybe it would be less awkward if we got help.”

After both girls agreed to participate in mediation, they met with their mediators, Helen and Juan, in the media center to sort out the conflict. All four students sat together at a table to review the Ground Rules.

Juan began, “Welcome to mediation. I am Juan.”

Helen added, “And I am Helen.”

Juan continued, “We understand that you two have a conflict. We’re here today to help you resolve it, but first we need to cover the Ground Rules. We will read you the list of rules and will check them off as you agree to each one. Sound good?”

Cindy and Sarah nodded their heads quietly.

“Great. Let’s get started. Cindy and Sarah, do you agree to the following: To meet with the above named person/people and mediators to resolve our conflict?”

Juan paused.

Cindy said, “Yes,” and Sarah said, “Yeah.” Sarah was looking at the ground.

Helen continued, “Do you agree to respect the mediators and follow our instructions?”

Cindy and Sarah affirmed their agreement once again.

Juan and Helen continued taking turns reviewing the rest of the Ground Rules (Van Hassel, 2018), including:

“To respect the mediators and follow their instructions.”

“To describe my point of view, including my thoughts, feelings, and what I would like to do to solve the problem.”

“To be a good listener and not interrupt if it is not my turn to speak.”

“To avoid name calling or blaming.”

“To control any anger I may be feeling.”

“To create a solution today that is agreeable to everyone.”

“To follow our agreement after it is signed.”

“To keep this session confidential. If anyone asks about mediation, I will only say

‘Our conflict was resolved.’”

“That the mediator is required to report anything discussed including the following red flag topics: suicide, abuse, illegal drugs, weapons, threats of violence. They will report this directly to the school staff to be handled professionally.”

“I understand that if we do not follow these rules, the mediation session will end immediately and will be documented.”

After Cindy and Sarah agreed to each rule as it was listed, Juan continued, “Okay, now that we’ve agreed to the Ground Rules, let’s talk about why we’re here. We’ll start with Cindy, since she requested the session, but then we will hear Sarah’s side of the story as well.”

Cindy began, “Well, we were on the bus, right, and Sarah was talking about my mama. Honestly, I’m usually a pretty chill person, but that was taking it a little too far. Of course I told her to stop, but she kept going and going, so I just got to the point where I had enough. So I slapped her face. She started hitting me back, so we just kept going until someone on the bus broke it up.”

Helen nodded, and summarized to make sure she got the important details. “So, you two were on the bus, and Sarah was talking trash, and that made you angry so you hit her, right?”

Cindy confirmed with a “Yes.”

Juan turned to Sarah, “Okay Sarah, it’s your turn to tell your side of the story.”

Sarah took a deep breath and began, “Well, Cindy is leavin’ out what happened before that. She was talking trash too, because we were just joking with each other.”

Helen turned to Cindy, “Is that true?”

Cindy, smiling sheepishly, nodded.

Juan interjected, “So it sounds like y’all were just joking around at first but it got out of hand. So let’s move on to solutions. What would you like to see happen?”

“I’d like to be friends again,” Cindy said.

Sarah remained silent, staring at the ground and shuffling her feet.

Helen asked, “Sarah, would you like to be friends again, too?”

Wiping the tear forming in her eye, Sarah said, “Yes. Cindy I’m sorry I made you upset. I was really only joking. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Cindy replied, “I’m sorry too, girl! You know I love you.”

Juan wrote that Cindy and Sarah agreed to be friends again, and to not talk trash about each other's family or solve their problems by fighting. The girls hugged each other and sat next to each other on the bus again. Cindy later approached me to thank me for suggesting peer mediation. Middle schoolers tend to be shy and embarrassed about certain social situations, and she felt that having mediators help them communicate was helpful and resolved the problem quickly.

The above scenario illustrates a successful mediation with a social conflict that was nearly identical to the situation described at the very beginning of this dissertation that led to this study. Two girls, who were previously close friends, got in a fight on school ground. The first scenario resulted in the school changing the schedules of the girls so they did not have to interact with each other anymore, while this scenario shows the girls salvaging their friendship with the help of Juan and Helen as Peer Leaders. Because Juan and Helen have been trained to execute the mediation protocol, they have provided and modeled the Discourse of conflict resolution to Cindy and Sarah. Sarah, who previously was very difficult and resistant to the Discourse of school, has since turned a new leaf, and even applied to become a peer mediator for the 2018-2019 school year. Juan and Helen are both strong mediators and continue to flourish within the program.

Research Question

What is the impact of implementing a middle school peer mediation program as a secondary Discourse for participants on their literacy and acceptance of school Discourse?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a peer mediation program with 7th grade students at Westchester Middle School by introducing the secondary Discourse of peer mediation.

Findings of Study

Case study data. The majority of the data collected for this study is in the form of handwritten observations, which served as the starting point for constructing the series of cases that are presented within this chapter. Other quantitative data, such as the STAR assessment, was measured for comparative purposes. The progress of the students on the STAR assessment was compared to that of the rest of the students on Team Falcon, as well as the students on the STEM team at Westchester. The survey data presented in this chapter served as information for the teacher-researcher to reflect and make informed decisions for the next step in the action research process (Mertler, 2014), which is to make adjustments for the next cycle of implementing the program. All of this data is presented through the frame of how student-participants are operating within the newly introduced Discourse of peer mediation, which scaffolds them towards literacy in the Discourse of school.

Below are descriptions of some of the individuals who trained to become a Peer Leader in the peer mediation program of the study. Each student displays different strengths and areas to work on, as well as primary Discourses, and the benefits of the program may vary depending on each child. It is evident when examining the cases that the teacher-researcher has become deeply immersed in the business of guiding students toward the construction of their new Discourse, both inside and outside of the context of

the Peer Mediation program. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) notes that it is the ethical obligation of a researcher to not remain a neutral bystander—it is our duty to contribute to a community in which we study, which is the teacher-researcher’s stance as well. As the teacher-researcher, it is important to note my own cultural background, as a white middle-class female, which impacts my perception of the problem of practice, interpretation of the compiled data, and any conclusions drawn from said data. It is also worth noting that as an experienced school teacher, the teacher-researcher approaches these student-participants as an agent who is expected to enforce the Discourse of school, particularly for those with misaligned primary Discourses.

According to Dyson & Genishi (2005), “This relationship between a grand phenomenon and mundane particulars suggests key theoretical assumptions of qualitative case studies, particularly those involving the production of *meaning* and its dependence on *context*,” (p. 4). There are a variety of types of cases that can be constructed using qualitative data, including critical, unusual, extreme, common, revelatory, and longitudinal cases (Yin, 2018). Due to data saturation, or repeated patterns found in the qualitative data, some of the cases will be condensed into one typical case, who is called Anne (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The more critical cases of this study, listed after Anne, will include Helen, Clark, Joseph, and Christopher. According to Yin (2018), a critical case “...would be critical to your theory or theoretical propositions,” (p. 49). The theory of this study is that the secondary Discourse of peer mediation is providing benefits to the peer mediators as they adapt to the secondary Discourse of school. Due to the abstract and variable nature of the potential outcomes of

a peer mediation program, it is important to consider the contexts and Discourses of the participants, which are outlined below.

Anne. Anne is a social type of girl who is frequently involved in the intricate web of drama that tends to brew in a middle school setting. She is very extroverted and seems to have a pulse on impending conflict because it is so interesting to her. Sometimes by being so knowledgeable of everyone else's business, she inadvertently contributes to the problem by spreading gossip about others. Her biggest challenge as a peer mediator is maintaining the confidentiality of others because it is very tempting for her to talk through these situations that captivate her attention. These tendencies are not aligned with the school Discourse; however, her "identity kit" is not devoid of tools that are valued within the Discourse of school. Despite having talkative tendencies, Anne comes from a disposition of caring and concern for others, which is why peer mediation hold appeal to her. She enjoys being a helper in the classroom and at home. Anne isn't necessarily the most academically successful student, but she enjoys school as a social institution and is rarely absent.

After the training phase of peer mediation had concluded, the Peer Leaders had started accepting cases for mediation sessions. The very first case was very intricate and had a lengthy, deep-rooted history that had been brewing for months. Anne was excited to take it on, as she shared class with the disputants and had heard quite a bit about this lengthy dispute already. Using her prior knowledge about this case, she was ready to help the disputants resolve their differences, partially because the constant gossip and drama was starting to irritate her and their other classmates.

The disputants, Samantha, Carrie, and Charlotte, and Miranda, were engaged in a toxic pattern of intentionally leaving one out or being friends with one and enemies with another. They would take turns over the months, sometimes leaving out Charlotte, and after making up, then they would leave out Miranda, and so on. Anne and Clark had taken the case together to resolve. Two of the four disputants had allowed the entire mediation team to listen to their conflict during a training session, which unveiled a piece of the conflict at that time. The disputants ran out of time during our training session when trying to convey their conflict, so they had signed up for mediation to resolve the problem and allow enough time for the entire history of the conflict to be unveiled. They ended up requiring three sessions, including the training session, to finally draft an agreement. Anne approached me within the week to discuss the case:

“Can I ask you something about my case?”

“Sure,” I responded.

“What do we do if we know that the disputants aren’t following their agreement?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Charlotte and Miranda have agreed to not be friends with Carrie anymore, but Carrie just told me that they’re still talking about her during class. Do we have to take them back to mediation to create a new contract?”

“Do you think that would work?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Anne replied. She took a deep breath and sighed. Her tone and actions seemed to suggest that she really didn’t want to mediate these girls anymore. “If they can’t stick to their original agreement, which they created, then I don’t think we

should waste any more of our time on the case. Since this has been going on for such a long time, I think it may be time to refer them to the counselor.”

I nodded in agreement. Anne, who typically revels in the drama that others create, seemed quite relieved. She took her folder of notes and the contract down to the counselor’s office and was ready to take her next case, which was much more straightforward and successful. Anne’s ability to communicate with the disputants and the teacher-researcher that peer mediation was not effective for this group is an indicator that she is becoming proficient in the Discourse of peer mediation, as well as school.

Helen. Helen is a high achiever in school with her academics, but sometimes finds herself at the receiving end of teasing and bullying from her peers. As an openly bisexual 7th grader in a small-town community, life can be tough from time to time. Sometimes students tell her that she is going to hell for liking girls. Sometimes they make fun of her hair. Through it all, Helen has a positive sense of self and knows who her true friends are. Helen is involved in other activities at the school, including cheerleading and other clubs. She was excited to sign up for Peer Mediation, because she has been on the receiving end of bullying and feels like this may be a good way to stop it.

As part of the training process, students are encouraged to create their own scenarios to practice role playing through the mediation process to practice reading the ground rules, creating solutions for problems, and generally adjust to the new Discourse that peer mediation has to offer. Helen engaged in a mock dispute with another peer mediator, pretending that she stole the other girl’s boyfriend. She giggled as they acted out this scenario, which to her seemed a bit outlandish.

One day, Helen and a few other girls approached me to ask if I would talk with them about something important. I leaned in to listen.

“We noticed a lot of kids are getting picked on if they’re gay,” Anne explained to me. “Like, Helen is bisexual and Desmond is picking on her and telling her that she’s gross.”

I thoughtfully considered my response.

“What would you like me to do about it?”

“Well, we were thinking about starting an LGBT club at the school,” Anne replied.

“I can’t just create a club,” I responded. “You’ll have to ask the principal for that.”

I set up a meeting so the girls could meet with the principal. They asked her if I may be the advisor for the club, but I mentioned that I was pretty swamped with other obligations. The principal asked them to come up with a mission statement and a plan, and to come back to her when they have found another advisor. In the meantime, I recommended that Helen ask Damon to come to mediation with her so they might sort out his hurtful words. She decided to address him outside of mediation, which resulted in a peaceful resolution without the need for others to intervene. Her training in peer mediation gave her the proper Discourse to stay calm and address the problem independently in a peaceful manner.

Helen’s Discourse, which includes her bisexual identity, places her in a position to be marginalized by school, her peers, and society at large (Carlson, 2017). By acquiring the secondary Discourse of peer mediation, she is learning about social justice

and the steps that can be taken to achieve it. In Helen's "toolkit" of peer mediation's Discourse, she is finding a scaffold toward the school Discourse by learning about how clubs are formed, how widely they permeate the school and impact the students within, and how to advocate for change within a school.

Clark. Clark scrambled into the classroom, showing me his new Deadpool keychain that he got over the weekend. I smiled, telling him that I liked it, and prompted him to start his work for the day. Clark is in Special Education for a specific learning disability in the area of reading. When reading aloud, he often takes a slower pace than most students and tends to have trouble pronouncing words. He began the year on a 4.6 grade level for reading and finished the year at a 6.4 reading level, with an overall increase of 1.8 grade levels. Despite the fact that his reading speed, or fluency, is a bit behind, Clark takes his time to fully understand reading or writing assignments. He will often submit writing assignments that are above and beyond minimum requirements, because he does enjoy quality storytelling.

"Today we're going to read *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe," I announced. Immediately, Clark raised his hand. Typically this meant he had some sort of connection to make to the material, which I encourage.

"I've heard of Edgar Allan Poe!" he exclaimed. "He was on South Park."

Preparing myself to cut off the conversation in case it is inappropriate, I allowed to Clark to continue.

"There was an episode with a bunch of goth kids, and everyone was confusing them with the emo kids, so they tried to resurrect the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe to ask for help."

This was my chance to engage.

“Edgar Allan Poe is considered an important figure to the movement of Gothic literature,” I explained, transitioning the conversation back to Language Arts.

Clark is typically quick to share things he’s seen on TV or in the movies to connect with whatever we do in class. His home Discourse involves a lot of connection with pop culture, which helps him build upon the Discourse at school—even though sometimes it’s not quite what is considered school-appropriate.

Clark’s grandmother, who has custody of Clark, attended an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting with us sometime after the Peer Mediation applications were submitted. She was excited and had high hopes for Clark’s participation in the program because he does not participate in any other extracurricular activities, and he has been a victim of bullying at our school. Her hope was that Clark may learn some skills and strategies for minimalizing his own victimization, as well as increasing his own social skills. She expressed concern about his social skills by telling us that at times he takes others too literally and can be the target of teasing because other children can easily trick him. Clark’s grandmother told us a story about the previous summer, when some children convinced him he could fly, and he climbed up on the roof to try it out. Thankfully he was not hurt, but she said she walked outside to find him on the roof, claiming he was able to fly because other children told him so.

When Clark joined the peer mediation program, he was very enthusiastic about getting started. He often volunteered to read aloud as we reviewed training materials, and he wanted to be the first to act out the role-playing activities involved with the training. His love for storytelling was evident when he would create scenarios for the students to

practice mediation. However, his attention to detail was evident when he attempted to summarize conflicts.

“So, to summarize what you said,” he started, as we practiced summarizing situations to help clarify conflicts.

“You were mad at Charlotte because she was supposed to bring glue sticks for a school project and she didn’t bring it. And then she started saying bad things to you because you were ignoring her? And then she…”

Samantha shook her head.

Helen asked Samantha, “So who was ignoring first? Was it you or Charlotte?”

Samantha clarified, “She said we were ignoring her but we really weren’t.”

Betty asked, “Who is ‘we’? Is there another person involved?”

Needless to say, the session took quite a while to clarify this particular situation, but it became evident to me that Clark may have trouble leaving out little details, like glue sticks, and boiling a situation down to the basics: Someone felt ignored. This is one of the reasons why the program is designed for multiple mediators to help at each session. Each student has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. While Clark struggles to weed out details, his strength is that he is very creative and quite good at brainstorming solutions to the problems of others.

“So, do you think you should agree to be friends from now on? Or would it be smarter to just quit talking to each other?” he asks.

The disputants think about their situation and decide to take Clark’s suggestion to quit talking to each other, which was more agreeable than being forced to continue a strained friendship.

Clark's primary Discourse includes one of storytelling. His love of movies and television permeates his conversations, and his creativity knows no bounds (sometimes to his own detriment within the Discourse of school). By training as a peer mediator, Clark is offered a secondary Discourse that will help him over time to communicate effectively with others and offers him tools that will help him sharpen that communication in a way that is more straightforward and aligned with the Discourse of school. As a student who does not have a lot of friends, Clark is one who also benefits from the social conventions offered within the Discourse of peer mediation, such as the comradery that comes with being in a club, as well as working in pairs on each case.

Joseph. One day, Joseph approached me before class started.

“Can I talk to you in private?” he asked.

“Sure,” I responded, as the rest of the students filed into the classroom and began their work. I stepped into the hallway and shut the door, so Joseph may speak freely. Joseph is a student who plays drums in the middle school band, as well as in the high school's marching band. He is a well-behaved student but can sometimes speak to other students without thinking carefully about their reaction first. He got in trouble earlier in the school year for telling a child that he looked like a potato head. He considers that child a friend and did not mean any harm. I had a feeling a similar situation was brewing.

“Some kids were talking to me about Juan earlier today, because they think that he might be gay. Then they asked me to ask him if he is, so I did, and it made him really upset. I mean, I don't care if he is—I wouldn't think any differently of him. He's my friend. But now he's really mad at me and I didn't mean to hurt his feelings. I feel really bad.”

I took the situation in. What does Joseph expect me to do about this? And more importantly, as Peer Mediators, are Joseph and Juan not able to handle this situation on their own? I considered recommending that they go to mediation, but decided that since they are trained mediators, this might be a chance to navigate conflict independently.

“I’ll talk to him, Joseph,” I responded. “It’ll be okay.”

He thanked me and returned to the classroom. Not wanting to waste more class time, I waited until the end of class to speak to Juan.

“Juan, can I speak to you in the hall for a moment?”

“Yes ma’am,” he responded.

Juan is a very social young man with a gift for empathy. One of his teachers reported this year that Juan had the insight to approach him and ask if he was feeling okay when the teacher was having a bad day. His care and concern for the feelings of others has made him an ideal candidate for the Peer Mediation program. He does not participate in any other school activities.

Juan stepped into the hallway with me, where I explained to him, “Joseph told me earlier that he said something to you today that made you upset.” Juan’s eyes drifted to the floor. It was obvious that he did not want to go into details about such a personal topic.

I continued, “He came to me because he still wants to be your friend and he feels really bad about it. Do you think, that since you are both Peer Mediators, that you could sort this situation out peacefully?”

Juan considered this, and slowly nodded his head. “Yes ma’am,” he responded.

“Then I will leave it at that. You’re both very good at communicating and I think you know how to get through this together.”

Later that day, I passed Juan in the hallway and asked, “Did you two get a chance to talk and work things out?”

Juan smiled at me, nodding. “We did,” he said.

“Good,” I responded. “I’m proud of you.”

In this interchange, Joseph and Juan have demonstrated an advanced step into the gradual release of responsibility, which is a form of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). While they still wanted me to mediate for them, I released the responsibility of the Discourse of mediation back to them, which they utilized successfully. As a student who will often speak before thinking, Joseph demonstrates a Discourse that could be better aligned with that of school. The Discourse of peer mediation in this case offered him recourse when this happened, but may also prompt him to shift toward more thoughtful conversations in the future.

Christopher. It was the first week of school.

“Christopher, come show them your back!”

Christopher rolled his eyes as his mother requested that he come closer so she may lift his shirt and show all of his teachers, practically strangers, the scars on his back from multiple childhood surgeries.

“He’s my miracle boy. We’re lucky he’s even around! His father and I were older when he was conceived, and they told me he wasn’t going to make it,” his mother explained.

“This is what happens when old people breed.” She chuckled at her own joke.

As the teachers shifted uncomfortably in their seats at the sight of what unfolded before them, they could tell that Christopher was coming in from a home with a very different Discourse than what is typically experienced at school. A home where it is acceptable to openly discuss disabilities, surgeries, and medical needs. Many things that—in a conservative, small town public school—were not often openly discussed. Christopher’s mother continued to rattle off, like a litany, the list of his conditions. Autism, heart problems, muscular dystrophy, back problems, and respiratory issues were all fully explained to let teachers know what kind of life Christopher lives. He had a birth defect—some of his organs had grown in the wrong place, crowding his lungs, and one lung was surgically removed as they rearranged where everything should be.

Yes, Christopher was a walking, talking miracle; and he was very different from most children. Avoiding eye contact with us, he sat quietly as the rest of us wrapped up the meeting. Christopher’s mother told us that he often needs to be checked on, as he will stay quiet and not ask for help even if he doesn’t know what is going on. As a team, we decided that Christopher’s unofficial goal this year was to start to speak up if he needs something.

“I found this on my desk, what should I do with it?” he asked me later that week. Christopher stood in front of me, holding a very small crumpled up piece of notebook paper.

“You can throw that away, Christopher,” I replied. Little interchanges like this were productive for communicating, even though I thought it was common sense for him to throw away a scrap of trash on his desk.

“Okay class, it’s time to work in groups of three to four students,” I announced.
“You may pick your groups today.”

I intentionally allowed this class to pick their own groups, so Christopher can navigate the room and find his way to a social interaction. This announcement typically resulted in quick frenzy of students leaping from their seats to find their very best friend at the moment to work with. I watched from a distance, as Christopher slowly approached different groups of students to ask, “Can I be in your group?” He often asked it very quietly, and sometimes other students didn’t hear him. He would try again, until he got their attention. Some kids may say, “Oh, we already have a full group.” Some came to me and asked, “Do we have to work with him?” I typically told them yes. After a while, Christopher had figured out who was willing to work with him in the class and had learned to ask them first in the future. Sometimes they said yes, sometimes they said no. He got a taste of a raw social life with minimal adult intervention, which seemed new to him.

Christopher made a lot of personal growth throughout the year, even without the peer mediation program. Christopher did not participate in any extracurricular activities at school, so it came as a surprise when he applied for Peer Mediation. He wants to make more friends and has figured out that this is a good way to network with other kids outside of a purely academic setting. Becoming a Peer Mediator offered an interesting opportunity for Christopher. Since Peer Mediators essentially must read from a script during their sessions, there is minimal pressure for him to try to think of what to say in the moment. Beyond Peer Mediation, Christopher was always more willing to read aloud in Language Arts class than he was to attempt answering a question that may be right or

wrong. It is because of this preference that the partially scripted nature of Peer Mediation sessions allow him to be comfortable moving forward in the program. Overall, Peer Mediation has allowed Christopher a safe space to interact with peers outside of the classroom in a way he is comfortable with. It provides him with an opportunity to be involved in his school in an extracurricular way.

One day, in a training session, I had introduced the Peer Mediators to the concept of confidentiality.

“When you mediate a dispute,” I explained, “you must respect everyone’s privacy by not telling them about the details of the problem, unless it is a red flag behavior. In those cases, you only tell me, so I can get that information to the correct adults. Otherwise, if anyone asks about it, just tell them that the problem has been solved.”

Christopher’s hand shot in the air.

“Yes, Christopher?”

“What about our parents? I don’t want to keep secrets from my mom.”

This was a valid question, so I took a moment to think about it.

“Hm, that is an interesting point. I think you can still protect people’s privacy but still be open with your mom. Maybe you can tell her what kinds of problems you helped solve without telling her the names of who was involved.”

Christopher seemed satisfied with this answer, and said, “Okay.”

There were many other occasions throughout the year when Christopher had no hesitation to ask for clarification if he needed help. Sometimes he continued to ask for permission for things he didn’t need to ask, such as throwing away a scrap of paper in the trash, or for permission to leave the room so he may vomit when he was sick. By the end

of the school year, Christopher was asking other kids to help him create a Bad Eggs II account, so that he may play games with others online. He was paying attention to the social Discourse of other children at the school, while working toward a sense of belonging.

Student STAR assessment changes. Like many schools, the Discourse of Westchester Middle School has an emphasis on excellence, particularly when it comes to academics. When the peer mediation program was designed, it was the hope of the teacher-researcher that the student-participants would gain skills that would benefit them within the Discourse of school. Because of Westchester's emphasis on academics, the only academic pre-test and post-test administered throughout the 2017-2018 school year was selected as a gauge to compare the progress of the student-participants to non-participants when it came to the factor of growth. This is why the STAR (Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading) Reading assessment was chosen as an indicator of quantitative data related to the peer mediators. Overall, the Peer Leaders performed significantly well, but the explanation pinpointing why remains inconclusive, as will be explained below.

When comparing the average growth of the Peer Leaders to the rest of Team Falcon, there was a significantly larger amount of growth in reading scores over the school year for the Peer Leaders. To determine this growth amount, the STAR growth number, in terms of grade level, of each student was averaged together by the teacher-researcher. The ten mediators' growth amounts were averaged together, and then the remaining 54 students on Team Falcon (four were absent during post-test so this data is not inclusive of the entire team) also had their scores averaged together. The average

growth of the peer mediators came to .84 of a grade level, while the rest of the team had an average growth of .53 of a grade level. The difference in growth between the Peer Leaders and the rest of Team Falcon, who all have the same Language Arts teacher, are illustrated below in Figure 4.1.

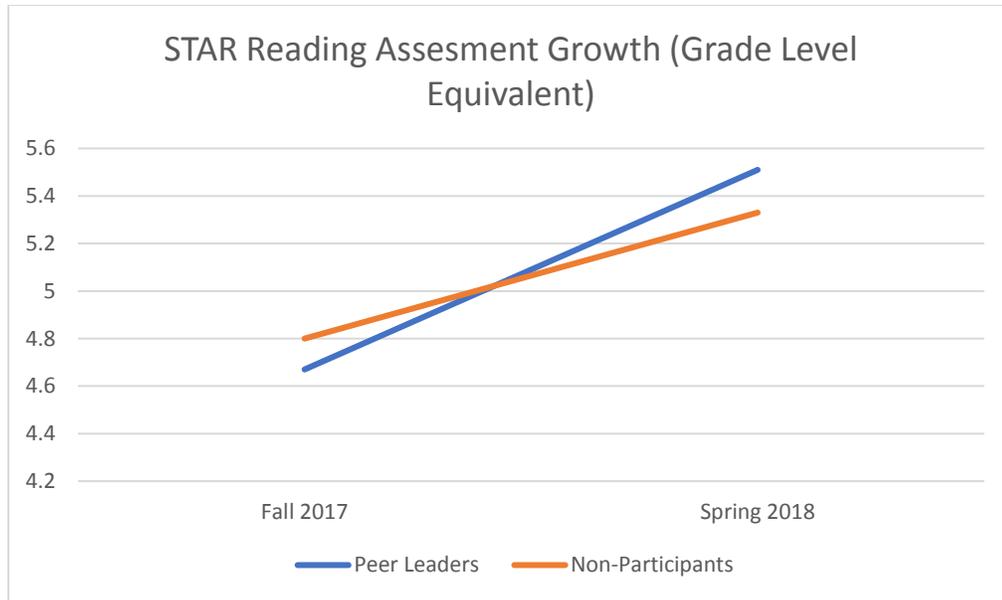


Figure 4.1- STAR Reading Assessment Growth

In addition to the difference between Peer Leaders and non-participants on the same team, the average grade level STAR assessment scores of the STEM team at the school started significantly higher than those on Team Falcon. The average grade level equivalent at the beginning of the year was 7.5 for the STEM team, with the average grade level equivalent at the same time for Team Falcon was 4.8. Ideally, students would show a whole year/grade level of growth throughout the year, but there are extraneous factors that play into test scores, such as having a bad day, not showing up to testing (some scores are missing due to this), and inaccurately high scores on the pre-test. One student, for example, scored on a 10th grade reading level at the beginning of the school

year and his post-test was back at the middle school level (even after a second attempt). He believes he just got lucky the first time around. This phenomenon also became evident with the STEM team, which averaged a loss of .16 of a grade level over the course of the school year, likely due to the fact that with such high initial scores, there was little room to grow.

In addition to collecting and analyzing the reading scores for each Peer Leader, the teacher-researcher gathered information from students via a survey to gauge their interest and satisfaction with the program as a whole, as well as to aid in planning the next step in the action research process.

Student survey data. Students were sent a survey at the end of the year via Google Forms (Appendix I). Their responses were anonymous to encourage honesty. Of the ten surveyed, only four responded. Their unedited responses are listed below:

Explain why you wanted to be a Peer Leader this year. 4 responses

it was a great experience because u got to help people with their problems and help them work out our problems

Because so I can help kids with their problems when they are have a conflict with someone else and then it will give me more confidence so i can do more when I get older.

so that i can help people with there promles
to solve peoples problems

Did you find that the training was helpful? Why or why not? Is there anything you would change about it? 4 responses

i think it was great i had no issue about the training

Yes it was very helpful because i had no idea what it was until you introduced it to me and then i was alright with it and now when someone is in need of peer mediation i can just help them with a snap.

yes because i did not know want to do

yes. because it helps me solving peoples problems reasonably

Do you have any suggestions for improvements or changes to be made to the program for next year? 4 responses

maybe put in real life situations and experience it

No none its great just how it is.

no

no not at all

Do you participate in any other programs or sports at school outside of the required clubs? If so, which ones? 4 responses

just cheerleading

No but when im in 8th grade i might do more things than im already doing.

softball

marching band

If Peer Mediation was offered after school next year, would you still participate?

4 responses



Figure 4.2- Student End of year Survey Data

The data above shows certain patterns in the responses of the students. The first question, which asked for the reason that each student wanted to join the peer mediation program, had a unanimous answer of helping other with their problems from each participant. This shows a unified belief within the Discourse of peer mediation that helping others is valuable. The second question, asking about the effectiveness of the training, shows all participants reporting that they found it helpful, with two admitting that they previously did not know about conflict resolution, which demonstrates that the training helped them add to their “toolkit” of Discourse. For the third question, which asks for suggestions or changes for next year, reveals that only one had a suggestion, which was to add, “real life situations and experience it.” It is unclear if this student

means more realistic conflicts in the role-playing portion of training or if they are referring to the “real life” of the adult world, such as how mediation would play out in the workforce, for example. The other three survey participants did not have suggestions to make. The next question asks if students are participating in other extracurricular activities at school, which reveals that three of are and one indicates that he or she may want to participate in more school activities next year, which supports the claim that the Discourse of peer mediation can serve as a bridge to other secondary Discourses within the school.

Interpretation of the Results of the Study

Each student-participant within the study has his or her own unique set of strengths and areas that need improvement in order to bring them full membership in the Discourse of school and a sense of belonging to that Discourse. Some are more social, such as Anne, Joseph, and Juan, and do not benefit in the same way as someone such as Christopher, who desires to be more social but is not naturally extroverted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the benefits of a socially-centered program can vary depending on the needs of each child. However, most of the participants are struggling readers, and also struggle with the Discourse of school in some way. Whether they come from families that do not value academics in the sense explained by resistance theory (Nieto & Bode, 2012) or would rather discuss the latest episode of South Park, all of these students need extra support when it comes to navigating school social situations as they explore their own identities.

The significant difference in STAR scores may be the result of an increase of motivation, which can be analyzed using Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory

(2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) posit that there are a variety of factors that motivate people, and each person has a different set of motivators, which are reflective of their beliefs, which is a vital part of their Discourse (Gee, 2014). They argue that some social contexts can stifle motivation, while others enhance it. It is plausible that the social context of being a Peer Leader increases the expectations to perform in school (Vygotsky, 1978). Deci and Ryan (2000) have found that the three most essential factors for optimal functioning and social development include, "...the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy..." (p. 68). All three of these needs are explored through peer mediation—the Peer Leaders become competent in conflict resolution, they build a relatedness to others within their school community, and they practice mediation independently, promoting their sense of autonomy. These factors are all different parts of the Discourse of peer mediation because they help everyone distinguish the *who* of Peer Leaders who are competent in the *what* of conflict resolution (Gee, 2014). Specific impacts on each need for the Peer Leaders are outlined below.

Anne. Anne became more competent in the area of self-awareness. Throughout her experience as a peer mediator, she realized through the training's emphasis on confidentiality, which is a major part of the Discourse of peer mediation, that she sometimes contributes to conflicts by discussing the thoughts and opinions of others with the wrong people. She feels the relatedness to others in a more positive way than she did prior to becoming an apprentice of peer mediation (Gee, 1989). While she strives to no longer serve as a gossip source, her concern for others and efforts to protect confidentiality has built more positive relationships between herself and her peers, which shows an enhancement of her school Discourse. Anne's need for autonomy has been met

because she is being trusted with the secrets of others that surround the conflicts she is charged with resolving. This responsibility and trust enables her to make critical decisions independently as a Peer Leader.

Helen. Helen is arguably already very competent in a variety of ways, but her participation in cheerleading and peer mediation has shown that she is a leader who is already competent in the Discourse of school. Her classroom teachers have taken note of this and will often request that she help out other students if they struggle with directions, due to her superior communication skills. Helen is related in the sense that she is very popular and active in the school community. Her sense of connection with both students and teachers alike makes her a unique student. She entered the peer mediation program this way, and it is likely that the program and the other students within it benefitted greatly from her participation due to her useful primary Discourse. Helen has earned the trust of the adults at the school to lead others, and as a result has already been provided with a great deal of autonomy and independence as a student. In the context of the peer mediation program, she has been selected to help train new Peer Leaders for the 2018-2019 school year during lunch while the facilitator is unavailable.

Clark. Clark is a student who struggles with the Discourse of school in a few different ways, both academically and socially. However, his participation in peer mediation has given him practical experience in a secondary Discourse when it comes to interacting with his peers. Clark's competency need is met by peer mediation because he is valued as a senior Peer Leader in the 2018-2019 school year, and is helping with training the other students, much like Helen. Clark's need for relatedness is satisfied by peer mediation's extracurricular nature. He does not participate in any other school clubs

or activities, so this helps Clark invest in the school culture beyond the classroom.

Clark's sense of autonomy is met by the independence and responsibility granted to mediate sessions.

Joseph. Joseph started out in 7th grade as a relatively quiet and shy student. His participation in the peer mediation program was a little surprising because he seemed so introverted, but the program suited him well. Joseph's quiet and calm primary Discourse made him a good candidate, as he does not frequently get sucked into "drama" with other students, but sometimes speaks very matter-of-factly without thinking first. This no-nonsense type of personality helps him remain neutral while he mediates the conflicts of others. Joseph's need for competence has been met by the program because he is looked to as a source of comfort by the other students. His need for relatedness is enhanced by peer mediation because his only other extracurricular activity is with the high school marching band, so this allows him to participate at the level of his own school. Joseph is another student who was trusted to train new Peer Leaders for the 2018-2019 school year, satisfying the need for autonomy.

Christopher. Confident with reading both in the classroom and during mediation, Christopher began negotiating more social situations independently than he did prior to joining the Peer Mediation program. At the beginning of the year, Christopher struggled to communicate with others and advocate for himself both in the classroom when he needs help, and also in social situations, because his school Discourse was lacking when it came to social situations. Peer mediation as a secondary Discourse equipped Christopher with social tools to begin building connections with other students by belonging in the same club. This boost in confidence helped to build Christopher's

autonomy. He started completing more tasks independently and voluntarily deciding for himself what he wants, rather than waiting for adults to negotiate and make decisions for him, as he had in the past. Christopher decided not to participate in Peer Mediation this year. His case manager reports that he says it would cut into his “personal time,” and she suspects that the fact that it is after school this year may throw off his daily routine, which is not something he is interested in doing. In addition, Christopher is scheduled to have surgery on his back this year for scoliosis and will likely be out of school for a long time. His teachers this year report that he still seeks help with little things, such as asking permission to throw away a piece of trash; however, he is continuing to advocate for himself in the classroom in every subject by asking for help when he needs it, which means the enhancement to his school Discourse has not been lost.

Conclusion

The secondary Discourse of peer mediation has provided student-participants with a “toolkit” that has served as a bridge toward the Discourse of school, as is evidenced by changes noted by their teachers, changes in their STAR Reading assessment, and patterns documented within the end-of year survey (Appendix I). The results of this study include a significant difference in STAR assessment scores between those who participated to train as Peer Leaders and those who did not. Of the surveyed participants, 100% showed interest in participating in the program again, and patterns of the Discourse of peer mediation, such as value in helping others, and the desire to participate in extracurricular activities, were documented. Immediately following implementation of the program, the amount of referrals and incidences of violence at school showed no significant change; however, each of the Peer Leaders was impacted in a different way when observing

through the Deci and Ryan (2000) lens of the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Since these students are having their needs met, it is possible that they are operating at their optimal potential, which may have an impact on their motivation.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Problem of Practice for this study stemmed from the constant disruptions to the learning environment across many classrooms within the school of the study. These disruptions ranged from teaching being asked to discuss conflicts between students in the hallway, to refusal of some students to work with one another in cooperative learning groups, to physical fighting that sometimes resulted in injuries, changes to schedules, and general trauma among students and faculty alike. The intervention of a peer mediation program was designed to curtail these disruptions, encourage students to participate in a new Discourse (Gee, 1987, 2014) that is restorative (Hansberry & Hansberry, 2018) in nature, with the goal of increasing instructional achievement and decreasing incidences of violence. The findings of the study demonstrate a significantly larger increase in reading scores on the STAR assessment for the Peer Leaders when being compared to other 7th graders with the same Language Arts instruction, as well as patterns of the new Discourse carrying over into the Discourse of school. This chapter will provide an overview and summary of the study, questions, and suggested additional research, an action plan for the teacher-researcher, and a conclusion statement.

Overview and Summary of the Study

To address the problem of practice within Westchester Middle School, the teacher-researcher of this study successfully piloted a small peer mediation program at a middle school to serve as a behavioral and academic intervention. Out of the students

who applied to train as Peer Leaders with the program, ten were selected and then trained in conflict resolution for peer mediation. This leadership opportunity was only made available to 7th grade students on Team Falcon, due to the need for this group of students to engage in extracurricular activities that they otherwise are not typically offered, in contrast with the STEM team at the school, which regularly engages in extra opportunities. The major findings of this study include a marked difference in motivation, as evidenced by STAR assessment results, and behavioral observations, as well as an increase in the 21st Century Skills of communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2015), which are reflective of the Discourse of peer mediation.

Motivation. The Peer Leader participants showed greater gains in reading scores, with a difference of .31 of a grade level, over the course of a year than their peers with the same Language Arts teacher (Figure 4.1). This significant difference is potentially due to increased academic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), or due to the repeated script reading within the program (Dotson-Shupe, 2017). The teacher-researcher believes that there is an increase in motivation within the students due to their acquisition of the Discourse of peer mediation, which scaffolds them into the Discourse of school; however, this information may be coincidental, and the study should be repeated in the future to determine the validity of these findings. The repetition of this study should be within the same school with different students as well as at different schools with different students and facilitators.

When examining the cases presented about the participants, it is evident that the peer mediation program impacts students in a variety of ways, due to the diverse nature

of the students and their primary Discourses. Overall, the students have benefitted from the program by stepping into leadership roles within the school, being trusted with the responsibility of caring for their fellow students, fitting the Hansberry & Hansberry (2018) notion of a restorative school. All of the students surveyed found the program valuable enough to commit to participating again the following school year, and showed a pattern of valuing the ability to help others, which reveals a core belief within the Discourse of peer mediation.

21st Century Skills. The skills of communication, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration are all generally considered to be vital to the success of the modern student to contribute to our society in the future when they join the workforce (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2015). The peer mediation program designed in this study has provided the opportunity for students to sharpen and refine these skills as a part of the Discourse of peer mediation. The four C's of 21st Century Learning, as acquired through the peer mediation program are described below.

The communication of the students is honed by the introduction of active listening and repeating and summarizing information to ensure mutual understanding of thoughts and feelings. These are both “tools” of the Discourse of peer mediation. Many of the student-participants began the program with a gift for communicating, but the students who did not, such as Christopher, had a safe supportive environment in which to practice communicating with others as he approximated, or produced a “mushfake” (Gee, 1989) of the Discourse of peer mediation. There was no academic pressure of being right or wrong, and there were a variety of peers to provide feedback to Christopher and guide

him toward more proficient and effective ways of speaking with other students, which bridged into his social Discourse of school.

Creativity, the next skill, was enhanced throughout participation in the peer mediation program in a few different ways. Students were tasked with role-playing mediation sessions with conflict ideas that were listed in the teacher-researcher's manual, and some that they created on their own. In addition to creating their own role-playing scenarios, Peer Leaders utilized their creativity to produce video commercials to advertise their services to the rest of the school. Both of these creative skills bridge into their school Discourse because students are expected to think on their feet to participate in class, which is why the improvisational nature of the role-playing is helpful. For example, in the "Case of the Stolen Lunch," (Van Hassel, p. 33), students are asked to act out a scenario in which one student's lunch was stolen out of the locker of another. Helen, playing the role of an accused disputant, decided to blame the crime on a monkey, which certainly made the job of the mediators much more daunting than if she had just admitted it was her. This creativity on Helen's part led the mediators to think critically, which is the next skill.

The critical thinking involved in peer mediation is a lifelong skill that will serve the students well both within the Discourse of peer mediation and that of school. In the example above, Helen challenged the realm of possibility by blaming locker theft on a monkey. Realistically, a monkey would not be in the school—however, the mediators, despite knowing that this may have been a lie, had to accept this as a truth in their scenario. Knowing that different people hold varied perceptions of the truth is one of the components of the Discourse of peer mediation, because mediators must accept that

everyone's voice must be heard and valued. They discussed the possibility that some disputants will have different versions of the truth, which makes mediating more challenging at times. Once they decided to accept the monkey story as Helen's truth, the mediators worked on a resolution involving forming a monkey-watch crew, similar to a neighborhood watch that reports crimes within a community. The contract between the disputants involved working together to form the crew, which falls in line with the next skill, collaboration.

Collaboration is a tricky skill for some middle schoolers. Many young adolescents tend to want to work with their friends and can be quite picky about who they collaborate or even associate with, as evidenced by Christopher's experience of attempting to find groups to work with during class. This pickiness clashes with the school Discourse; however, peer mediators are expected to collaborate with each other without complaint. It has been explained to them that oftentimes in the real world, people do not get to pick and choose others with whom they work, but they must assess the task at hand and decide how they will utilize their strengths and those of others to complete their task. This level of professionalism is expected of the peer mediators and in most cases their new Discourse is observed when the Peer Leaders become capable of recognizing Clark's attention to detail, Christopher's ability to get to the point, Anne's gift for empathy, or Helen's determination to not give in to extraneous pressures. The Discourse of positivity and strength-based recognition of others contributes to the peer mediators' collaboration abilities.

Overall, the program had a successful start, but leaves the teacher-researcher with a few unresolved questions, which will be addressed below. Additional studies will be

required to determine the validity of these findings, as well as explore new variations of peer mediation programs and the benefits they may offer students in other schools. The teacher-researcher believes there are many benefits to providing leadership opportunities to students, particularly those who have been previously marginalized by the school system.

Questions and Suggested Additional Research

The first remaining question of this study is: Is the increase in reading achievement a fluke—is it due to the scripted nature of the program and fluency practice, the addition of a unique Discourse, or an increase in motivation?

Doston-Shupe (2017) has conducted research regarding the repeated reading of texts, concluding that this practice can indeed lead to an increase of fluency. Reading fluency, which is measured by the speed one achieves while reading out loud, has a connection to overall reading comprehension (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). While the STAR assessment does not measure a student's fluency (it is a computer-based test, so there is no reading aloud involved), it does establish a grade level equivalent score, which gives the teacher-researcher an idea of comprehension ability. While there are some exceptions to the correlation between fluency and comprehension, such as speech impediments, local dialect (which impacts speed of speech), or anxiety, generally students who are more fluent tend to have better comprehension (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). This does not mean that an emphasis on fluency should be implemented in the classroom, but when students are provided with texts to read on a regular basis, whether it is a singular repeated text, or a variety, it is probable that a student's reading level will increase when they are constantly engaged in the reading process.

James Paul Gee (2007, 2014) posits that there are advantages to introducing a new Discourse to students in an educational setting. Each Discourse serves as a linguistic repertoire and broadens a child's experience, which provides them with a broader cognitive schema to aid in problem solving and dealing with future situations. Similar findings were established by Shirley Brice Heath (1983) when, upon analyzing recordings of every day speech, she found that a boy who participated in an after-school drama program developed a new set of speech which involved more discussion and planning of the future than he did prior to his participation. In the case of the peer mediation program, students are provided with a new set of words and phrases to utilize when faced with a tough social situation. They are taught to be active listeners, to consider situations carefully and calmly, and to focus on solutions that leave everyone feeling satisfied. This may be a contrast from the Discourse of home, where problem solving may look and sound differently than it would in an educational environment. A remaining question is: Can this secondary Discourse can serve them well within the more academic contexts of school? This prompts more research to be conducted, perhaps tracking the grades and scores of participants beyond their STAR assessments.

The second remaining question of the study is: Is it possible for similar results be reproduced? Is this a phenomenon that may happen with any school club, or is there something unique about peer mediation that leads to better reading scores? Certainly, studies should be repeated to ensure validity. Does being a Peer Leader really impact reading skills or was that a happy coincidence? Based upon the information above addressing the confounding variables involved with the program, the teacher-researcher

does believe that similar results are possible, even though it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact reason why.

The last remaining question is: What are the next steps for this program? This study will need to be repeated in other school settings to ensure the results are valid, but until that happens, the teacher-researcher must decide what changes to make within the current program. The teacher-researcher is expanding the program to make it available to the whole school in order to be more inclusive. There will still be a quiet push to select students who may not have any other activities to participate in, who may get themselves into trouble if they are not involved in a club, or who are not involved in the more privileged STEM program at school. For the following school year, the training will take place after school, to include all three grade levels. The guidance counselor at the school is interested in adding a book club component to the program to help with character education and peer mentoring. This component is being added to tailor the program in compliance with a recent North Carolina legislative requirement for all middle and high schools to provide peer-to-peer mentoring programs within their schools. Due to this legislation, the program will be expanded to other schools within the district, and potentially other districts within the state. These additions and adjustments will be discussed in more detail below within the action plan.

The suggestions for future research include repeating this study within other school environments, and measuring other variables associated with the program, such as McKay's 2007 study that examined the quality of the school climate. Many peer mediation programs have been implemented around the world, but there still remains little research established about the impact these programs have on students, teachers, and

behaviors. Another future research possibility may be to examine different clubs or programs and measure the dimension of reading to see if there is a general trend of increased reading achievement when joining a club or activity at school.

Action Plan

The action plan of this research is a direct result of the action research steps of developing and reflecting (Mertler, 2014). Action research is cyclical in nature and will include the ongoing process of making adjustments to practice based on observations and findings of the previous cycle. For example, the teacher-researcher plans on making the program more inclusive by allowing students from the entire school to apply to become Peer Leaders, regardless of grade level or team placement. This is to promote equity; because the original problem of practice stemmed from friction as a result of the systemic practice of exclusion within the Discourse of school. Since one of the core values of the Discourse of peer mediation is that everyone's voice is valued and deserves to be shared, it is important for the facilitator to model that openness with participants. While it was powerful to offer this program only to the students who are marginalized, by offering it to everyone regardless of grade level, track, etc., the students can collaborate with each other as equals rather than offering leadership exclusively to one track. However, the students who participated in the previous round are still regarded as leaders since they have the experiences to share with new trainees, fulfilling their motivation need for competency (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Due to logistics of offering to all grade levels, training will be moved to after school rather than during the school day. Mediation sessions will still occur during the school day, most likely during lunch when students are not missing out on instructional

time. There will be another round of training, allotting a total amount of time of four hours after school for training purposes to cover all of the material in the teacher-researcher’s manual: *Peer Mediation: Peer Leader Student Manual* (Van Hassel, 2018). These four after-school sessions will occur during the first quarter of the school year, to allow for more time that students can accept cases throughout the school year, as well as build upon their proficiency within the Discourse of peer mediation.

The guidance counselor at Westchester Middle School has expressed interest in adding a book club component to the program to tailor the program to meet the needs of recent North Carolina legislation, requiring that all middle and high schools implement peer-to-peer mentoring programs. The purpose of the book club, which will be led by the Peer Leaders, is to serve as a platform of open discussion about school-related social issues, such as bullying, racism, poverty, peer pressure, and more. These conversations will be aimed at helping the students of the Westchester Middle School community to make better decisions in and out of school, and recognize which situations require additional assistance from adults, which is reflective of the Discourse of peer mediation. The timeline for these proposed changes is outlined in the table below:

Accepting Applications	Training of students	Lunch Book Club Meetings	Dates for ongoing meetings after school
September 3- October 5	October 5 (Returning Peer Leaders) October 8	Every Thursday starting November 15	November 19 December 10 January 14 February 11

	October 11		March 12
	October 12		April 15
	October 15		May 13
	October 16		June 3

Figure 5.1- Action Plan Timeline

Conclusion

It can be concluded that a variety of positive outcomes may result from implementing a Peer Mediation program, such as giving students an opportunity to become involved in something beyond academics at school, allowing students to learn appropriate social skills, included in the secondary Discourse of peer mediation, in safe, structured setting, and benefitting from the repeated scripted reading provided within the training and mediation sessions. The secondary Discourse of peer mediation did serve as a bridge for students to further acquire the school Discourse, some academically, and some socially. Further studies will be required to confirm any such benefits.

While there was still a physical altercation that took place within Team Falcon after the Peer Mediation program was established (the fight on the bus between Cindy and Sarah), it can be argued that this program does not necessarily prevent violence, but may provide students with a route of reconciliation after these outbursts occur. When our students are tasked with taking an active role in their school to help care for one another, they are gaining lifelong 21st century skills that will serve them well as adults, including creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and

communication (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2015). Students who train in conflict resolution are learning how to communicate effectively with the Discourse of peer mediation and how to critically solve problems independently. Middle school is a crucial time for students to establish their identity and determine which values they will hold for the rest of their lives, which is why the introduction of a secondary Discourse can be so impactful, as a part of their “identity toolkit,” (Gee, 1987). When they are given the power, responsibility, and trust to be leaders, then they utilizing a Discourse that has the potential to change their lives.

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APPENDIX A

PEER MEDIATION FLYER

Peer Mediation!

Want to make a difference in your school? Want to learn how to stop conflicts and bullying? You could become a peer mediator and lead your classmates to a more peaceful environment!

For more information, contact Ms. Tavera in room 610 for a permission slip!



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APPENDIX B
PARENT CONSENT FORM

Dear _____,

My name is Stephanie Van Hassel. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and I would like to invite your child to participate.

I am studying bullying and potential ways to reduce it. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she will be asked to complete some surveys about bullying, and train in a peer mediation program.

Peer mediation is defined as a process by which students help other students resolve conflicts. This not only builds their independence and social skills, but creates a leadership opportunity for those who are involved. Peer mediators will train with Mrs. Van Hassel during Streamline time during school hours and will then begin mediating conflicts after training is complete. Mediations will also take place during Streamline, so the core academic instruction will not be disturbed by this process.

Taking part in the study is your decision. Your child does not have to be in this study if you do not want. Your child may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question they are not comfortable participating.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (803)201-2726 or stavera@scotland.k12.nc.us if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at (803)777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like your child to participate, please sign the bottom of this form and print your child's first and last name clearly. When you are done, please send this form back to school with your child to turn in to me.

With kind regards,

Stephanie Van Hassel

(803)201-2726

stavera@scotland.k12.nc.us

APPENDIX C

PEER LEADER APPLICATION

Enter your first and last name.

What grade are you in?

6

7

8

Why do you think you'd make a good Peer Leader?

Are you involved in any other school activities this year? If so, please list them.

Which teacher has agreed to recommend you for this program?
(I will send their form directly.)

APPENDIX D
TEACHER RECOMMENDATION FORM

Student Name:

Does this student follow directions well?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Does this student demonstrate responsibility?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Does this student demonstrate the ability to solve problems independently?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Does this student communicate effectively?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Is there any other reason this student should/should not be considered for the Peer Mediation program?

APPENDIX E

PEER MEDIATION FEEDBACK SURVEY

After your mediation session, please respond to the survey and let us know how we did!

Your name: _____

Your mediators: _____

Rate your satisfaction with the agreement/contract:

Not at all satisfied

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Very satisfied

Please rate how well your Peer Leaders communicated:

Not at all satisfied

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Very satisfied

Please rate how well your Peer Leaders listened to you:

Not at all satisfied

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Very satisfied

How satisfied are you with the overall experience?

Not at all satisfied

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Very satisfied

Is there any other feedback you'd like to provide us?

APPENDIX F
PEER MEDIATION REQUEST FORM

Request for Peer Mediation

Please fill out this form to request a peer mediation session if you are having a conflict (problem/disagreement) with someone else.

Please list the first and last names of all students involved, along with their grade level.

Briefly describe the conflict.

Person requesting mediation:

-

APPENDIX G

GROUND RULES FOR PEER MEDIATION

Peer Leaders: _____

Name of individuals involved in conflict:

I agree to the following:

- To meet with the above named person/people and mediators to resolve our conflict.**
- To respect the mediators and follow their instructions.**
- To describe my point of view, including my thoughts, feelings, and what I would like to do to solve the problem.**
- To be a good listener and not interrupt if it is not my turn to speak.**
- To avoid name calling or blaming.**
- To control any anger I may be feeling.**
- To create a solution today that is agreeable to everyone.**
- To follow our agreement after it is signed.**
- To keep this session confidential. If anyone asks about mediation, I will only say "Our conflict was resolved."**
- That the mediator is required to report anything discussed including the following red flag topics: suicide, abuse, illegal drugs, weapons, threats of violence. They will report this directly to the school staff to be handled professionally.**

- I understand that if we do not follow these rules, the mediation session will end immediately and will be documented.**

Signatures:

Adapted from:
Sorenson, D. (1992). *Conflict resolution and mediation for peer helpers*. Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.

APPENDIX H
TEACHER SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. How frequently do you experience class disruptions in your classroom?

2. In your opinion, what is the root cause of these disruptions?

3. What are your ideas for improving the behavior situation within our grade level?

4. If students were permitted to leave your class to sort out their conflicts, would you allow them to do so? Why?

5. If the instances of bullying and fighting decreased, how would that change your classroom?

APPENDIX I
END OF YEAR SURVEY FOR PEER LEADERS

Explain why you wanted to be a Peer Leader this year.

Did you find that the training was helpful? Why or why not? Is there anything you would change about it?

Do you have any suggestions for improvements or changes that could be made to the program for next year?

Do you participate in any other programs or sports at school outside of the required clubs? If so, which ones?

If Peer Mediation was offered at school again next year, would you still participate?

APPENDIX J

PEER LEADER ASSESSMENT

Please complete this assessment to finish your Peer Leader training.

* Required

What are the two different types of conflicts? *

Internal

Endocrine

Thermal

External

Which types of conflicts do Peer Leaders help to resolve? *

Internal

Endocrine

Thermal

External

What does SLANT stand for? *

Sit, Learn, Attention, Teach

Sit up, Lean forward, Ask questions, Nod, Track Speaker

Stephanie, Larry, Atticus, Nicco, Taylor

What are some common causes of conflict? *

Miscommunication

Pet peeves

Different perceptions

Different expectations

All of the above

What are considered "Red Flag" topics that end a session and should be reported immediately? (Check all that apply) *

Suicide

Abuse

Gossip

Illegal drugs

Threats

Alcohol

What is the ability to share and understand the feelings of another person? *

Sympathy

Empathy

Jealously

Responsibility