Peer Mediation Services for Conflict Resolution in Schools – What transformations in school culture characterise successful implementation?

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Aims

To highlight:

- how interventions such as peer mediation can be represented as alternative models of activity/culture, underpinned by contrasting principles of power and control to more traditional and teacher-centred models (e.g. arbitration of conflict by teachers),

- the transformations required of school culture for peer mediation to be more meaningfully implemented,

- to raise some questions for discussion about equity, inclusion, empowerment and research…

Sources of evidence

- Peer mediation
  - Action research at 1 primary school implementing peer mediation
  - Post-intervention research at 8 others schools implementing peer mediation
  - Reflection on experience providing training in schools and visiting services running in other schools
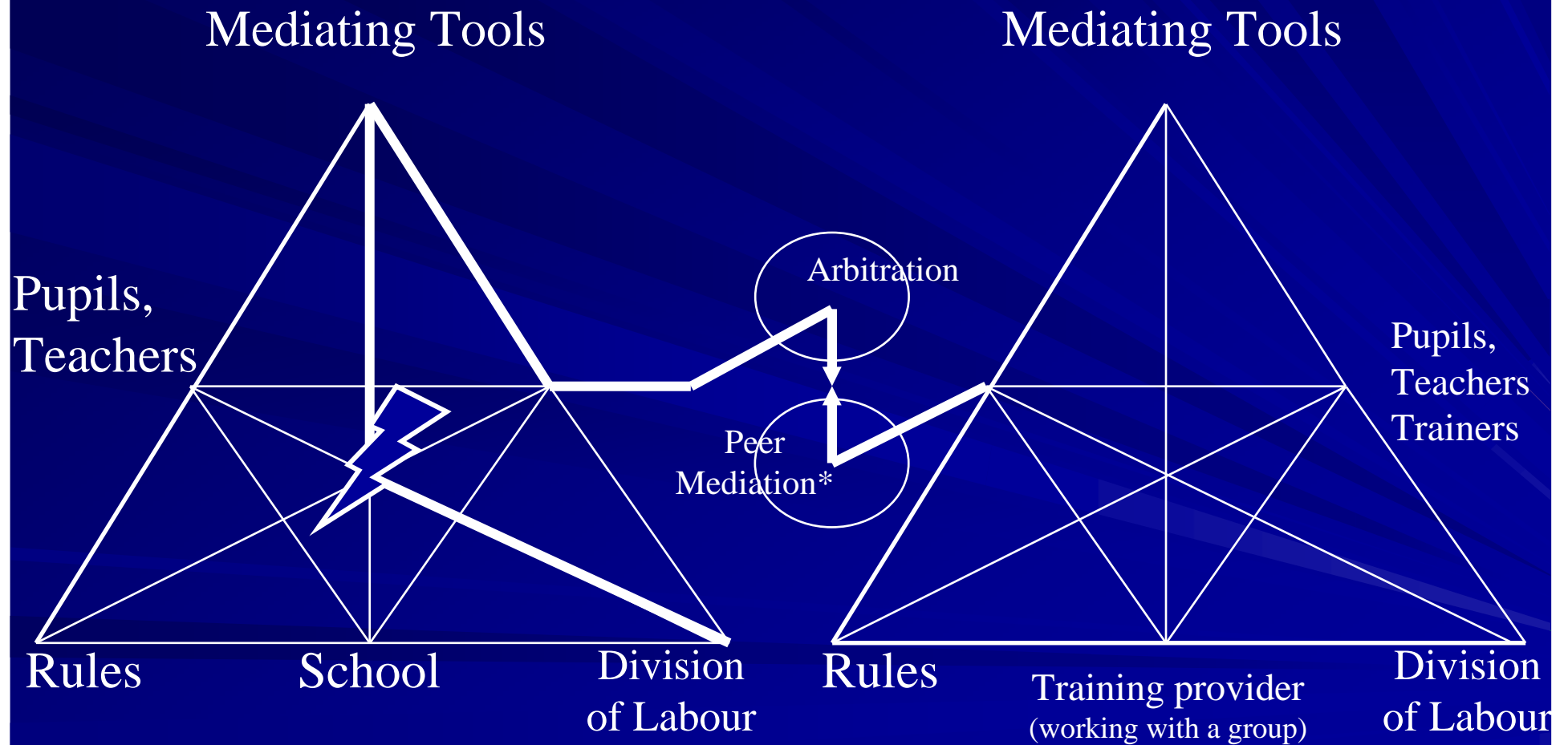
Argument

- Schools underestimate the degree of cultural transformation needed to support pupil empowerment projects
- Transformation requires changes in roles, responsibilities, perceptions and language concerning authority
- The nature of tools and relationships produced by restorative approaches warrants some scrutiny

How *Activity Theory* can help us understand cultural transformative processes in schools (Engestrom 1999)

- Provides a unit of analysis for understanding schools as cultural systems
- Individual and social transformation are studied as integrative processes
- Transformation is an essential research methodology
- Provides a number of concepts for describing collective activity (see next slide)
  - Mediating tools
  - 'Contradictions' as propellants of change
  - 'Multivoicedness'

Pupil empowerment programmes as alternative models of activity

Mediating Tools

Mediating Tools

Arbitration

Pupils, Teachers

Pupils, Teachers Trainers

Peer Mediation*

Rules

School

Division of Labour

Rules

Training provider (working with a group)

Division of Labour

What transformations are associated with the implementation of peer mediation?

- Shifts in the division of labour
  - Psychologically, this requires teachers to reconceptualise their views of authority, power and control and give pupils' trust and responsibilities
- Production and use of new tools
- Critical mass and synergy (the support of the community), long-term planning for sustainability

"dinnertimes seem easier because lunchtime supervisors are not having to deal with the small problems, they're going to peer mediation. They are now able to spend more time with the deeper problems that peer mediation doesn't deal with".

(teacher)

"If we ask the teacher, one of us might be upset because one of us might get into trouble. With peer mediators, you know you're not going to get into trouble."

(pupil)

"Its not just teacher lead, all the staff are trained to use the same procedures, so the lunchtime supervisors do the same thing and the children expect that if something's happened that mediation will be available and they'll have an input into that mediation. They don't expect to be told off and that will be the end of everything. They expect to contribute ideas for resolution."

(Headteacher)

"The aims were isolated…and to try and do it for one hour a week when for the other twenty hours a week, the regime was totally different… teachers reacted to small groups of disruptive children by exerting their influence and control. Discipline across the school was teacher led and then they came to this one lesson where that didn't apply, where they were given responsibility for their own behaviour and they didn't cope with it very well."

(Headteacher)

R: What are the differences and similarities between the school culture and the intervention?

T: All the systems of reward and punishment are teacher lead and mediation isn't and the two things really are (knocks fists together) going to clash. They're mutually exclusive.

R: Does this cause any problems?

T: I think it does in the establishment of mediation as a means of living peacefully because there's a tradition and expectation that teachers will sort out behaviour problems and mediators are coming from a different perspective, expecting people to sort out their own problems and find their own solutions rather than appealing to an external objective authority.

Cohen's ideal system of conflict resolution

Peace…

Keeping

Making

Building
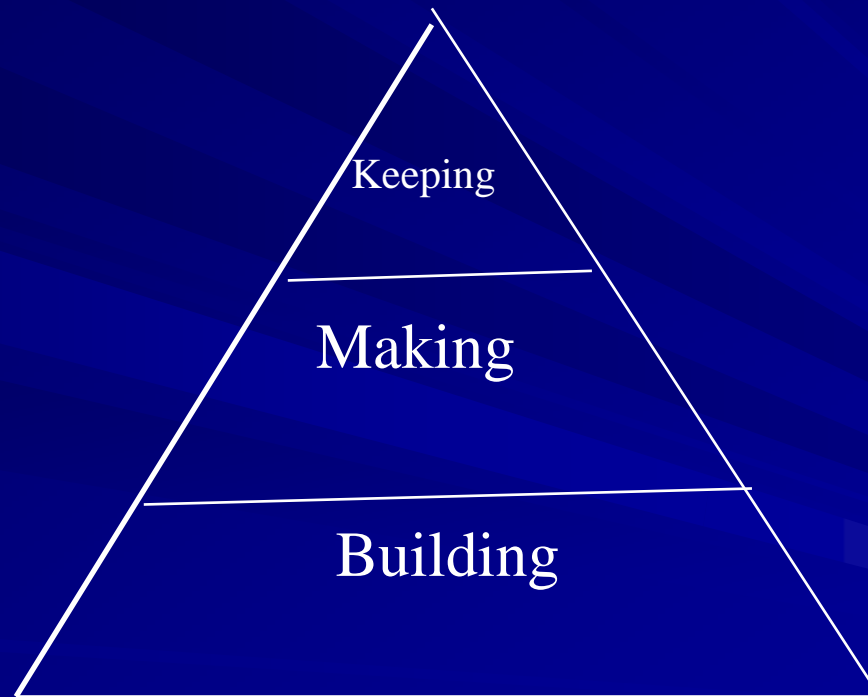
The (re)production of a new tool

R: What kinds of conflict did you experience before being trained as a peer mediator?

P: Usually a lot of people arguing and shouting at each other and everybody else not knowing what to do, usually just standing in the background not knowing what to do so the fight would go on and get worse.

E: Would you have been one of those standing in the background?

P: Yes, because I wouldn't know what to do.

E: And has that changed at all?

P: I'm now trying to sort out the problems before it gets too violent.

E: How do you do that?

P: Well, I go in and ask them to calm down and ask them the different questions and try to make them see that its not what they think it is and that its different and then they should see that its not a fighting matter and should make friends.

E: And what questions do you use?

P: I ask them what's happened and who's doing it with them if the others have gone off, and then we go and find them and ask them to explain what's happened, the other person explains what's happened and then think about the two things that they've said and then give them a few ideas and think about what to do next.

E: Where do those questions come from?

P: The scripts, I use some of the words that are on the script.

E: When do you use those scripts?

P: When we're peer mediating at the moment, but we usually remember them and we use them outside as well.

"I think I am better now at talking with the children over a problem. I actually do use the peer mediation script when I'm dealing with two children. I don't read it out but I know the way to talk, to get one child to say something and then to say to the other and how to make it more of a tennis match, if you like, between the two children. Whereas originally, I would have spoke to them individually with them standing in front of me... Instead now, I'm more, we'll hear the one side, we'll hear the other side and then we'll hear what that person's going to do and what the other person's going to do... And I think they've got better at that now because they immediately hear how each other is feeling."

(Teacher)

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(Teacher)

Impact on learning and identity

- Pupils potentially learned:
  - They have role to play in difficult conflicts
  - New forms of language for exploring different goals and feelings
- Teachers potentially learned:
  - Pupils need to learn to manage conflict for themselves
  - New forms of language were useful and educational classroom management strategies

Limitations of activity theory (Daniels 2001)

- Focus is on tool use and outcome
- Elements of culture are under described
- Bernstein's (2000) attention to power and communication may be helpful, particularly his concepts of classification and framing

Conflict resolution, classification and framing

Arbitration	Peer Mediation	Negotiation
Strong Classification	Weaker classification between teachers and pupils, stronger classification between pupils and peer mediators	Weak Classification
Strong Framing	Strong Framing	Weak Framing

Classification
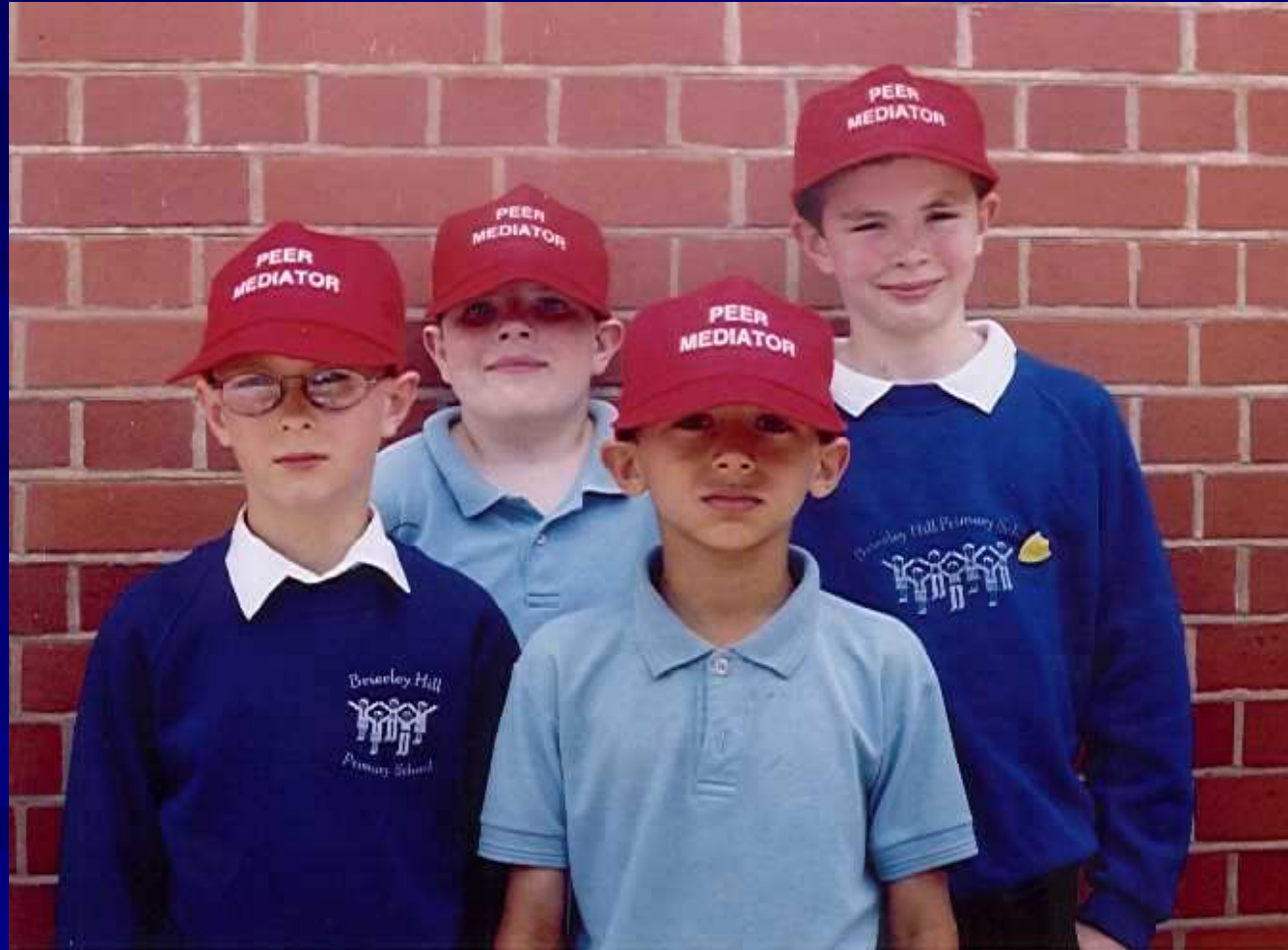
Framing

The peer mediation
script…

A more precise means of understanding 'the shift in the division of labour'

- Pupil empowerment, in the guise of peer mediators, mentors, school councillors, student researchers is not pupil empowerment wholesale. Rather it is the concession of some power to some students, who can become a clearly bounded group in their own right

- Pupil empowerment isn't necessarily the promotion of pupils' voice. They frequently use a tool that reproduces the voice of adults (e.g. mediation script). i.e. the tool is/was produced by adults

Discussion Theme 1

Restorative approaches are often claimed to empower, though this empowerment is underpinned by tools that are laden with certain values.

- Is this a problem?

  - If it is, how can restorative tools incorporate diversity? And given their emphasis on literacy, what alternatives are there and evidence of their utility?

  - If it isn't a problem, how can the values of restorative approaches be made more explicit and inform the culture of the school?

The type of empowerment provided by mediation training can also be 'selective'. Unless everybody is trained to mediate, learning about restorative practice occurs only for trainees and their clients.

- How can cultures be created where everybody learns about restorative practice?

Discussion Theme 2

Implementing restorative approaches may underestimate the degree of cultural transformation required, especially when such approaches are implemented as 'intervention's.

- How can 'restorative cultures' be achieved as an alternative to the intervention or quick-fix model?

Discussion Theme 3

The research reported here included participants' views, but perhaps in a limited way as they were subjects of the research rather than co-researchers. The impact of other research into restorative approaches in schools has sometimes used crude measures in an attempt to measure effectiveness.

- How can restorative approaches (and accompanying cultural change) best be accounted for? As a point of consistency with the underpinning philosophy of restorative approaches, is there a greater role for participants in this process?

References

■ Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity (2nd Edition),* London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

■ Daniels, H. (2001) *Vygotsky and Pedagogy,* London: Routledge.

■ Engestrom, Y. (1999) 'Activity theory and individual and social transformation' in Y. Engestrom, R. Miettinen & R. J. Punamaki (Eds.), *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.