

## Towards Restorative Communities - The School Mediation Project in Finland

### 1. Short description of the project:

The School mediation project is a national program organized by Finnish Forum for Mediation.

School mediation has two methods: 1. Peer mediation, where pupil mediators help parties of a conflict to find a solution to their conflict by themselves and thus change their behaviour, and 2. Adult-led mediation, where trained adults guide the parties (can also be conflict between pupil and teacher) to find a common agreement to the conflict.

- over 400 schools trained: primary, secondary, high schools, and vocational schools
- 9000 trained peer mediator pupils active
- 2000 trained supportive adults active
- over 10 000 cases mediated yearly
- about 20 000 pupils have solved their conflict successfully in mediation
- concerns 90 000 pupils plus their parents
- started trainings in kindergartens in autumn 2011

In all cases agreements are sought through a creative dialogue that concentrates on the parties' own experiences, feelings and needs. In restorative mediation it is essential that the parties are finding solution to their conflict themselves. The role of mediators is facilitating.

### 2. The activities and challenges of the project

Restorative mediation gives schools a genuinely participatory and restorative early intervention tool, with which the parties of a conflict can themselves take part in the resolution of their conflict. This participation enables pupils to learn democracy and conflict management, to change their behaviour in a positive way as well as to take responsibility for their own lives. Implementing the mediation method in a school starts by trainings, first of which is the training of the school's entire staff so that they fully understand this new method as their own intervention tool. After this, the staff chooses pupils who will be trained as peer mediators, as well as adults who will be their supporters. The project provides all the needed material and guidance. The project also organises advanced training for both the trainers and the schools as well as national and local seminars. The full-time employees of the project also participate in related national and international seminars.

Novelty we have developed an advanced training for the schools in order to transform a restorative school. In this training teachers learn not only to use restorative practice reactively in the case of conflict but also proactively when teaching. This means that after the training the head and teachers of a school can implement the restorative thinking as a whole school approach and use the restorative tool in daily work in school communities. Main hindrances on mediation in schools seem to be both existing teacher culture and youth cultures. Educational change in schools is usually rather slow. Not all the teachers have adopted mediation. The challenges reported in the researches have been included into future plannings and the project has developed for example better virtual arenas, local network seminars and advanced training to school staff, and lessons for teachers to include restorative practices to their teaching.

Since the project is part of the Finnish Forum for Mediation, we do close cooperation with other mediation arenas, which are: VOM, work place mediation, court mediation, environmental mediation, neighborhood (multicultural) mediation, family mediation, mediation done by advocats and peace mediation. Especially the project is taking part of a team for developing mediation in multicultural neighborhoods and families organized by Finnish Refugee Council.

### 3. The cooperation partners:

Collaboration with the Finnish Ministry of Education consists of yearly meetings. Finnish Slot Machine Association (RAY) funds the project. The teacher training schools of Finland offer an arena for passing on the information about mediation. Finnish Crime Prevention Council is taking part in cooperation. We are

also taking part in the work of national programme for the welfare of children, young and families organized by the Ministry of Education. NGO's we are working with are: Finnish Parents' Association, UN Association of Finland, VOM-offices, Finnish Refugee Council, The Finnish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, Steiner Pedagogic Union, etc. On the international level, we work in close collaboration with The European Forum for Restorative Justice ([www.euforumrj.org](http://www.euforumrj.org)), European Juvenile Justice Observatory (EJJO) and Nordic Forum for Mediation ([www.n-f-m.org](http://www.n-f-m.org)) and we participate actively conferences and seminars.

#### 4. The results of the project

Mediation is used in schools for preventing violence and improving democracy and participation of pupils. The latest research (Univ. of Lapland, 2011) shows that school communities are also increasing their social capital by restorative approaches. The progress of the project is measured by surveys every second year. Some main results: 86% are cases of verbal or physical harm doing. 95% of the cases referred to mediation led to a lasting agreement. 90% of peer mediators consider mediation valuable and 87% of the parties in the conflicts found it important that situations could be mediated through peer mediation. 91% of the parties felt that they have been heard in mediation. Early intervention can prevent the escalation of conflicts to long-lasting actions which often lead to the parties' stigmatisation and victimisation. As the main result of the latest research we defined the elements of restorative learning: 1. Restorative environment 2. Social phenomenons in restorative situation 3. The results of restorative learning.

Table 1. A summary of the phases, contents and results of restorative learning in peer mediation (Gellin 2011)

| The characteristics of restorative environment/space                 | The social manifestations of restorative learning  | The results produced by restorative learning  |
|--|--|---|
| Participation<br>Encounter face to face<br>Cooperation<br>Resolution | Listening<br>Respect<br>Dialogue<br>Interaction<br>Reflection<br>Understanding<br>Needs<br>Thoughts<br>Feelings<br>Actions | Empathy<br>Social skills<br>Sense of responsibility<br>Capability<br>Active citizenship |

#### 5. Contact details

Project Director Maija Gellin, PhD student, Univ. of Lapland  
School mediation –project “VERSO” / Finnish Forum for Mediation (FFM)  
gsm: +358407079076, / email: [maija.gellin@sovittelu.com](mailto:maija.gellin@sovittelu.com)  
homepage: [www.sovittelu.com/vertaissovittelu](http://www.sovittelu.com/vertaissovittelu)

*Gellin M. 2011. “Even a child can mediate.” What kind of learning are restorative practices in schools producing? An article on survey results. The article of the results of this research will soon be published in English on our homepage. The new book with English summary, Gellin M. 2011. Mediation in schools. Jyväskylä: PS-Publications, will be published 16<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011, which is the day we celebrate President Martti Ahtisaari's work for peace building here in Finland.*

Key words: Mediation, Peer mediation, School mediation, Restorative approaches, Learning, Participation, Conflict management, Reflection, Social skills, Democracy