

Mediation – A Personal Journey

By Akshat Chugh

Advanced mediator, peer mentor, body image leader, 2011-lifelong.

Mount Roskill Grammar School

Date: 18.9.2015

If I can give a time period of duration for my time as a mediator as one often does at graduation, I would be mistaken to not appreciate the extent of the influence it has had on me during my time at high school, currently at university, and most importantly, as a person still trying to define who I really am at the start of my early 20's.

Mediation teaches one a vast range of skills that can easily be listed. The reason why mediation holds such a strong reputation, at Mount Roskill Grammar School at least, is merited on its consistent high level of organization and its nature of being inclusive to the study body. Student leaders as mediators are trained by The Peace Foundation and as a result there is a minimum standard of achievement that has to be obtained in ensuring such a vital service is delivered properly. Even for assistance with the body image leaders programme, I was lucky enough to receive a huge amount of direction and mentoring by Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN) and later, Women's Health Action. I found this to be especially effective in helping to meet other like minded individuals from other schools at mediation functions and body image leader training sessions to be able to contrast ideas and build on skills that could later be translated for fresher ideas. I would heavily recommend to any students interested in mediation to not forget the key benefit that networks can hold. Mediation is not often regarded as a very social activity, but one of the main things I enjoyed about being involved in this service was the amount of talent, humour, and passion that I witnessed from other mediators, both at Mount Roskill and at other schools such as Sancta Maria College, Baradene College, and De La Salle College. I would definitely suggest in future years to propose more events involving greater collaboration among the other schools in order to capitalize all the intelligence, talent and good nature that is exemplary of mediators as a defining quality.

Each year the mediation service exceeds itself on being accessible to the diversity that it has to cater for. This is especially a challenge at a school like Mount Roskill Grammar School with the level of diversity that is presented for the staff to often deal with. During my time at high school I was also involved as an academic tutor and saw how crucial it was to be adaptable in delivering services to the hierarchy of needs. Mediation is not discriminatory to only those in need of help. I have had a great deal of pleasure myself from even procrastinating getting to class to just say greet to Mrs. Pace, a familiar face to anyone who has ever stepped in to the student services building. Anyone is welcome to make use of the mediation and peer mentor services available and the process ensures that students are always free to follow up on future assistance.

Mediation is greatly assisted by each of the school councillors whom students are able to make great use of for providing the guidance, mentorship and empathy that is needed. I have acquainted and developed relationships with many of the school councillors during my time at high school and have seen many peers gratefully appreciate the strength and wisdom they have provided. Given the often strict rules and disciplinary distinction between students and staff at secondary school, school councillors are a lot more relatable and approachable than many of the regular staff members. As student mediators, mediators work closely with councillors, especially during flagship events such as Peace Week which consistently amazes each individual involved on being both engaging and worthy of weeks of planning.

The key difference that mediation **works** however, in my personal is its teachings beyond the scope of student services. What students should be aware of both at school and in the future is that much of your personality is shaped by the people around you. Human connection is what drives us to continually teach us about what we know and what we think we know. I am currently in the second year of a five year commitment of a university degree and from time to time have to attend employer presentations from recruitment companies and agencies. It is of no surprise that there is the standard list of having appropriate work experience, some form of academic achievements and extracurricular involvement. However, what is most often the key area to distinguish between candidates is evaluating on who you are as a leader and how you stand in relation to others. Projects and work tasks are rarely done in isolation, and the need to cooperate and build on the collective strengths and weaknesses as a team are the defining route to success. Mediation teaches you to be culturally and socially sensitive of the needs of the others, and to not reach any judgment regardless of whatever situation you are faced with. Think of how culturally diverse New Zealand and the world is. Being able to meet others and to identify with them regardless of how different they are is again something which is championed as a strong assessment of character. I am still learning a lot more about being employable and the next steps after graduation, but the repeating theme I have seen is that while the core skills you learn in your degree or course are valuable, employers and people you meet don't solely hire you on that strict criteria. Hiring is a lot like investing in you. Many of these core skills can be taught, but the main difference is always struck in recognizing you for the skills you can offer beyond the 9-5 routine.

Never take for granted the feeling of comfort and trust that relationships can be founded on. I can definitely owe a lot of my current understanding in understanding what it is that is required in the 'real world' a lot to my experiences with mediation. A lot of the experiences at high school are questioned for their relevance to the 'real world.' Students feel disinterested with much of their teachings in classrooms for lack of application in everyday scenarios. While I can neither simply agree or disagree with that, mediation has relevance. Just like developing professional relationships, personal relationships hold equal importance. If you are an individual that is respectful, careful of others emotions and sensitivities, and are able to provide rational and carefully considered solutions to problems, then you notice the change in response in how

people approach you. People often mistake kindness for being submissive. I have found people opening up and telling about issues of personal significance to them as being a sign of trust. It is something which is built by the duration of a friendship or a relationship and its collective strength. Mediation has taught me to recognize the value of this and to develop relationships which have been the epitome of mutual trust and effort. I have a diverse range of friendships that have matured since intermediate and high school and I have seen the difference it makes when you are seen as the type of person worthy respect for what you can offer to others.

Mediation holds a special value that even after a thousand words I find hard to express. I have been lucky to recognize this both at the time in 2011 and now. I am still very much a mediator despite taking the badge off two years ago. The lessons I have learnt from Donna, Kalani, Margaret, Graham, Katie, as well as many other mediators, peer mentors and two body image leader teams, about kindness, empathy, and leadership, have been lessons I have taken with me for self improvement and for navigating key decisions.

I have learnt that while academic success is important, grades and achievement is not simply limited to what can be produced in a three hour examination slot. Maintaining your mental health and seeking a balance with a stable social life and extracurricular interests should be what we should be stressing. I would very much love to come back and often remind others that despite how much I value this now, these lessons can easily escape one's mind when success is often only measured by how many times an individual crosses the prize winning stage in one night. It would be a worthwhile investment to see more interaction with students about the importance of upholding mental health as a priority especially amongst the stress and the competition.

I have learnt about diversity and the value of appreciating this diversity. Ideas of social conformity and acceptance never seem to die. While we do require minimum standards of behaviour and custom from each person, being too quick to judge others on their individuality only does more harm than good. One of my favourite features of mediation was inclusivity. I loved how Donna would tailor Peace Week to make sure that everyone involved was able to shine. The various Peace Week conference anthems, songs and chants amplified the pace of the event and proved that everyone has a role to uphold in the ultimate goal of upholding peace. If we really value diversity, we have to preach it. The mediation service should really congratulate themselves on this success so far.

Most of all, mediation is about leadership. Leadership means different things to everyone and there is never a simple *right* answer. I was given the advice at the start of my final year of high school during a prefect orientation that 'to lead means to serve.' Over the years, I have re-evaluated my own styles of leadership and have contrasted between what works and what often does not. However, my initial understanding is still reflective of what I was told almost three years ago. To anyone thinking of becoming a mediator, don't limit yourself.

Be bold.

There are far too many issues, but too few leaders. I have been a year thirteen before and know at many times especially at the end of five years of routine that you know it all. What I wish someone would have told me is just that it is just the beginning. I am still as young and naïve as I was in many respects. Each day is as full of challenges, struggles, and endless deadlines that still have to be met. I am still learning and will never stop. Mediation is just a segment of this personal journey to growth. However, every journey has a beginning and an end, yet my journey with mediation is lifelong.

Thank you Donna Hourigan-Johnston for all your guidance over the years and for the many lives you have been a part of. I speak on behalf of all mediators, past and present, when I simply say thank you.