



VERSIO

PROGRAMME

VERSIO Program 25 years

Restorative approach and mediation in
early childhood education and schools in Finland
2001-2025

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Helsinki 2026

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1 BACKGROUND

1.1 Strengthening children's rights and participation

In Finland, the obligation to intervene in conflict and abusive behavior in schools is based on the Basic Education Act, which states that a pupil has the right to a safe study environment (Basic Education Act 1998/268, Chapter 7, 29 §). The government's proposal in its explanatory memorandum clarifies the content of 29 §: this provision obliges the organizers of education to ensure not only that the facilities intended for teaching are safe, but also that students are not subjected to violence or other harassment at school (HE 86/1997, 64). On the other hand, the Finnish Constitution (Chapter 2, 6 §) requires children to be treated equally as individuals so that they can express their views and have influence in their own life.

The Finnish Constitution thus upholds Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Opetushallitus 2014, Finnish National Agency for Education), the objectives of broad-based competence, such as learning how to learn, communication and expression of self, are established. Respect for human rights, the ability to appreciate interaction and the expression of one's own views are the skills needed in an increasingly diverse society.

According to the Core Curriculum, a school's mission is to strengthen the involvement and active citizenship of students so that they can hone their participation and communication skills while providing a safe environment for the school community. Mediation is emphasized in chapter 3.3 of the Core Curriculum, which highlights the values of participation and influencing and building a sustainable future. The chapter points out that pupils must be given the opportunities to learn to work together and to practice negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution, and critical reflection (Opetushallitus 2014; 20-24).

In 2018, the Finnish Ministry of Education published a report that presents development proposals related to regulatory change needs, strengthening of the participatory culture and the development of multidisciplinary cooperation, including restorative practices and mediation as an important part of daily activity. Mediation promotes restorative approaches to conflict resolution and helps prevent social exclusion by enabling the parties to return to their community without stigma. It strengthens a respectful, tolerant, and supportive climate that reduces the need for punishment. Mediation produces a culture of conflict management that enables children and students to participate in decision-making on issues related to their own lives and to practice mediation and conflict resolution skills. Regarding mediation, development proposal number 9c includes the need to further strengthen the culture of mediation in schools and day care (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2018: 24-26, 66-67).

The guidelines of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice affirms that friends treat each other well, trust each other and listen to and understand each other, so child friendly practices should seek to implement these ideals of friendship (European Union 2010: 7). Liefwaard, Rap and Bolscher (2016) reviewed Directive EU / 2016/800, published by the Council of Europe, on procedural guarantees in criminal proceedings against children suspected of having committed a criminal offense. The Directive stresses that a child's sense of dignity must be promoted in juvenile justice proceedings and that the child's innate right to dignity must be respected (Liefwaard et al. 2016: 81-83).

VERSO program is based on the theory of restorative justice. The restorative approach in Finnish schools differs from punishment-based disciplinary culture and zero-tolerance programs (Gellin 2019: 53-60; Gellin 2022: 294-295.). Many researchers have reported that zero-tolerance can lead to an increasing risk of exclusion from society and deeper experiences of injustice, which drives young people more misbehavior (f.ex. Vesikansa & Honkatukia 2018: 133-138; Welch & Payne 2018: 215-

234). In restorative approach conflicts are seen as a natural part of young people's development. Instead of sanctions, face-to-face meetings, ownership and an understanding of the effects of behavior, both from the individual and from the community's perspective, are emphasized. The UN report Promoting Restorative Justice for Children (2016) highlights children's rights. Restorative justice emphasizes the significance of what has happened for both human relations and for the future and seeks solutions to prevent the recurrence of the harmful event. Restorative justice procedures are appropriate for dealing with children's situations, regardless of whether the offense is minor or serious (United Nations 2016: 1-2).

Ervasti and Nylund (2014) have examined Nordic conflict management and mediation practices from the perspective of restorative justice. Rather than finding guilt, restorative mediation enables parties to discuss how the imbalance in a human relationship caused by an act can be restored. Fairness, in this sense, means rebuilding relationships, restoring the situation and looking to the future (Ervasti & Nylund 2014: 486-489). Chapman and Chapman (2016) point out that if carefully implemented, restorative process can increase a victim's willingness to overcome their anger and demands for punishment. The process itself can free people tied down by emotions, making forgiveness possible. If the victim feels that the offender is showing respect, empathy and a desire to compensate for the harm caused, forgiveness appears to be an opportunity to move forward (Chapman & Chapman 2016: 135-152).

Restorative justice in education can be described as an approach that enables the involvement of all parties affected by a conflict or misbehavior. However, in the field of education professionals speak more of the restorative approach and restorative practices than restorative justice. The term restorative approach refers not only to restorative practices but also to philosophical values, such as fostering positive relationships, fairness, respect and taking responsibility, as the basis for restorative practices (e.g. Gellin 2019; Hopkins & Gellin 2016; McCluskey 2018; Woods & Stewart 2018; Chapman et al. 2015; Morrison & Vaandering 2012;).

In the Finnish field of education, the restorative approach and mediation are the most used concepts professionally associated with the practices of restorative justice. In Finland, a program called VERSO has been offering training in the use of the restorative approach and mediation in schools nationwide since 2001. The restorative approach is practiced in a school context through mediation and restorative circles, as well as conference processes. In schools, mediation can be guided by students trained as peer mediators to resolve tensions between students and, also by adult or conference processes under the guidance of staff members trained as mediators when conflicts between students and school staff or adults and/or school staff and parents arise (Gellin 2019: 70-77).

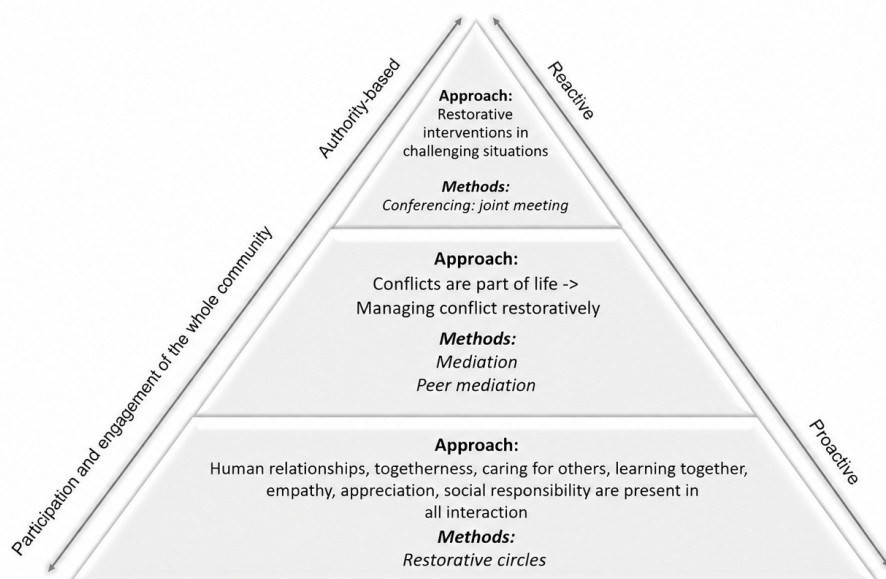


Fig. 1 VERSO Program as a whole school restorative approach

The VERSO Program supports early childhood education units, schools, and educational institutions in implementing restorative practices and mediation to handle conflicts constructively. The program fosters respectful communication, peer mediation, and a restorative school culture, involving both children and adults as active participants. VERSO-program is not just the method but the way to build up a whole school restorative school culture.

A key tenet of the VERSO approach is early intervention, addressing upsetting behaviors as soon as they emerge. In schools and educational institutions, both peer mediators (trained students) and adult mediators (trained staff members) facilitate these processes (Fig. 2). In early childhood education, staff receive training in practices for restorative mediation, while children are guided through the steps of mediation.

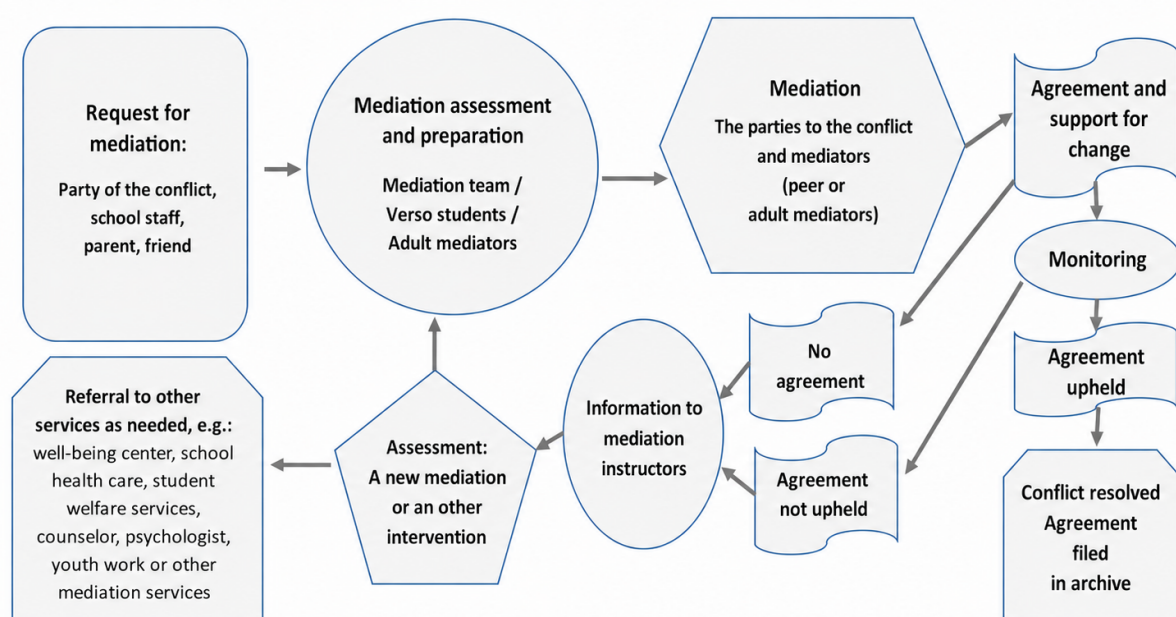


Fig. 2. The process of restorative mediation in schools following VERSO Program

Mediation follows a clear model in which trained staff members and pupils act as mediators, helping the parties themselves to find a solution to their conflict. Everyone involved can share their perspective, express their feelings, recognize their needs, and explore possible solutions. The process leads to an agreement whose implementation is later reviewed. Mediation intervenes in hurtful behavior as early as possible.

1.2 The short history of VERSO Program

The VERSO Program is organized in a framework of the Finnish Forum for Mediation (NGO) (Suomen Sovittelufoorumi ry). The pilot phase of the VERSO program was carried out within the Finnish Red Cross youth activities in several regional branches between 2001 and 2005. In 2006–2007, projects activities were financed by the Ministry of Education. Since 2008, the program has been funded by the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organizations (read more: Gellin 2018 254-255). In 2025 the VERSO program received a grant of €498,000 for 2025, contributing to a total budget of just under €700,000.

1.2.1 The story of VERSO Program

Dr. Maija Gellin, founder, developer, and former program director of the VERSO Program, was asked to tell the story of the VERSO program for the 25th anniversary celebration. The idea was that children in MiniVerso early childhood education settings and students in Verso schools are asked to visualize the story for the jubilee seminar in autumn 2026. The story of VERSO Program by Dr. Maija Gellin:

“Like so many times before, this story also began with an observation and a need for something that didn’t yet exist. Back in the 1990s, through my work and conversations with young people who had fallen outside education and working life, I kept hearing painful experiences from their school years. Many had never really felt heard, nor had they been valued as the experts of their own lives.

My colleagues and I talked about this often, and that’s where the idea began. It wasn’t really a new idea at all — in fact, it was something timeless, and maybe that’s exactly why it felt so powerful. Children and young people should be included in solving situations in their own lives and recognized as experts in those situations. My own experience strongly showed me that whenever we worked through difficult life situations together with young people, they themselves had the clearest understanding of what was needed at that moment and what kind of support would really help them.

Together with my colleagues, I started developing the idea into something practical. Gradually, I shaped it into a training program, which we piloted through the Finnish Red Cross youth work and the Voice of Helsinki Youth project. The very first peer mediation training took place in Helsinki in 2001. Soon after, the city of Kuusamo came calling, and before long, requests for training started coming in from all over Finland.

“Whenever we worked through difficult life situations together with young people, they themselves had the clearest understanding of what was needed at that moment and what kind of support would really help them.”

In those early training sessions, I was met with plenty of questions and some confusion too — but also with openness and willingness to try something new. My spouse, Jens, was actively involved in youth work within the Uusimaa district of the Finnish Red Cross, and at the time peer mediation was introduced to schools alongside first aid skills and multicultural work as part of a project focused on strengthening young people’s voice and agency.

The training program gradually evolved, and I created our very first materials for schools — a huge step forward at the time, including things like overhead projector transparencies. The first follow-up surveys with schools in 2003 also strengthened our confidence in Verso; with support, students were able to act successfully as peer mediators for one another, and the agreements they reached genuinely led to learning and changes in behavior. Little by little, my understanding of the power of peer support grew stronger. Soon, Verso training was taking place every week somewhere in Finland.

At the same time as Verso was beginning to grow in schools, a new organization was founded within the Finnish mediation field: the Finnish Forum for Mediation. Its aim was — and still is — to support the use of mediation across all areas of society. I became actively involved in the organization, both as a board member and as secretary, and through that work I continued gaining valuable knowledge and expertise that also strengthened the development of Verso.

At the time, my own role as a youth rehabilitation counsellor in my home municipality also included coordinating mediation in criminal and civil disputes (VOM) in our region, as well as working as a mediator myself. Through mediation work, I gained even more practical experience and deeper understanding that supported the development of school mediation. Peer mediation project also gained its own name, and the work officially became known as Verso. The word *Verso* is formed from the first letters of the two terms in the word peer mediation (*vertaissovittelu*) translated into Finnish. In Finnish, the word *Verso* means a new plant emerging from the ground - in that sense, the name for peer mediation activities in schools is perfect.

Verso continued to grow and flourish, nourished by the feedback we received from schools. It grew like a determined vine — an unofficial side project alongside my main job — gradually spreading both into the bedroom that had turned into Verso headquarters and into the increasingly full schedules of our first trainers. Then, in 2005, we reached a turning point. The phone rang, and we almost drove the car off the road from sheer excitement. The Ministry of Education and Culture had heard excellent feedback about Verso from the field, and now they invited us to apply for funding to expand and develop peer mediation work. The Verso vine had grown strong, developing new buds and searching for fresh ground to grow in. At that point, Verso finally became independent as a project — a strong, deep-rooted new vine, ready to flourish on its own.

Verso found its new home under the umbrella of the Finnish Forum for Mediation. Thanks to the funding we received, for the first time, I was able to focus on developing Verso full-time, and I could hire full-time trainers for the new Verso team. The first Verso video was produced, and developing training materials became an essential part of our work.

“The first follow-up surveys 2003 show: With support, students were able to act successfully as peer mediators for one another, and the agreements they reached genuinely led to learning and changes in behavior.”

In 2006, the Finnish Forum for Mediation organized an international mediation conference that brought together researchers and advocates of mediation from around the world. This gave the development of Verso a broader context and a stronger research base. Networking internationally — especially with schools and professionals from different countries — brought valuable new expertise to school mediation work in Finland as well. At home, collaboration and development continued together with the Ministry and, for example, the network of Teacher Training Schools, where student teachers received their first introduction to mediation and practical experience of school mediation work.

From 2008 onwards, Verso continued growing with support from Finland’s Slot Machine Association (RAY), and later from the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organizations (STEA) – both under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Funding naturally influenced the direction of development, and mediation began branching out in new ways as interest in the field increased.

Schools started asking when school staff would receive restorative mediation training of their own, while elsewhere President Tarja Halonen publicly wondered whether this kind of high-quality practice should already be introduced in early childhood education.

Those seeds eventually grew into two important developments: RESTO training for restorative approach and adult-led mediation, and, on the early childhood education side, the very first seedlings of MiniVerso in 2010. To strengthen training expertise in early childhood education, inspiration was even drawn from areas such as puppet theatre — and the journey into the world of MiniVerso had begun.

By this stage, Verso had grown so extensively that the project became known as the VERSO Program, covering restorative approach and mediation work in early childhood education, schools, and upper secondary education, as well as restorative practices and mediation skills for the adults working in those environments. Our team grew and since 2017 we have had 10 top experts on our team promoting VERSO's growth.

In the early 2000s, interest in developing a restorative approach to schools also grew internationally. The development in Finland was strongly influenced by our opportunity to participate in the conferences of the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ), the umbrella organization for restorative justice in Europe. EFRJ was founded in the same year our VERSO Program was born – so we are both having the 25 anniversaries now in 2026.

Since 2006 I and my team joined to EFRJ's biannual conferences, and we have found the strong network and support from the colleagues in different countries developing the restorative schools in their countries. Discussions, examples, research results and co-operation in this network have given us more understanding of good practices we could develop also in VERSO Program. Soon the VERSO team participated in international events with their own workshops, especially opening the importance of peer mediation activities from the perspective of respecting children's rights and valuing their expertise. Our starting point was - and still is - that peace in schools is built together with the students and staff of the schools, as well as the parents. Later I got the opportunity to join the work of EFRJ's Restorative Schools working group to share our experiences of working for the restorative approach in schools at an international level.

As international interest in restorative approach and mediation grew, seeds and seedlings of VERSO travelled through seminars and training sessions to many countries, including Sweden, Croatia, Qatar, Albania, Estonia, Russia, Northern Ireland, Italy, Spain and Scotland. Verso has also taken root internationally through projects led by Verso schools themselves. One wonderful example is the Martti Ahtisaari School in Kuopio, which brought Verso to Namibia through one of its partnership projects. Between 2014 and 2016, in cooperation with Plan International, we made several training visits to Uganda, helping Verso spread there as well. In Uganda, one of my long-held dreams became reality — something I still believe would be important in Finland too: mediation and the restorative approach were included as part of teacher education. I still sometimes wonder; when might this happen in Finland?

Thanks to support first from RAY and later STEA, VERSO has enjoyed years of stable growth. The program has become firmly rooted in Finland's education and early childhood sectors, reaching thousands of children and young people every year. Results from the field spoke for themselves, and words about VERSO spread naturally from one school community to another. The VERSO team grew stronger, and more people began recognizing Verso as something closely connected to mediation. Follow-up results encouraged us to continue. Restorative practices and mediation improved the atmosphere in schools and gave children and young people the chance to practice important social skills. Among adults, mediation skills significantly changed the way everyday conflicts were approached — by involving everyone, listening carefully, and offering support.

The Finnish National Core Curriculum introduced in 2014 placed increasing emphasis on participation and on practicing mediation skills as part of basic education. The revised Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curriculum highlighted peer relationships, community wellbeing, and opportunities for children to practice resolving conflicts constructively from an early age. The central idea that had carried the VERSO Program for years — that children and students are capable actors in their own lives and experts in the situations they face — found support in these official guiding documents as well.

“Mediation improved the atmosphere in schools and gave children and young people the chance to practice important social skills. Among adults, mediation skills significantly changed the way everyday conflicts were approached — by involving everyone, listening carefully, and offering support.”

In 2015, we celebrated 15 years of Verso work and the VERSO Program, and we were honored to receive recognition for our work from President Sauli Niinistö. The positive power of peer support has increasingly been recognized as an important part of developing interaction skills, even in difficult everyday situations. Skills for resolving conflicts through talking and discussion — learned in early childhood education and schools — were already being seen as an important civic skill, something President Tarja Halonen herself had spoken about ten years earlier.

I also had the pleasure and honor to meet President Martti Ahtisaari at the office of CMI when I presented him my book *Mediation at School*, published in 2011. As a former teacher, Ahtisaari was deeply interested in school mediation. He asked thoughtful questions and listened carefully to the details of mediation processes. As I was leaving, he offered me one final presidential piece of advice: “Maija, remember — keep it simple!”

Alongside the training that launched VERSO activities, we actively continued developing ways to support long-term implementation and sustainability. In 2018, we also launched a mentoring model built on the power of peer support. The following year saw the first national RÖNSY seminar, which has since become an important annual event bringing together people involved in the VERSO Program all over the country.

Before moving into the current decade, we reached yet another major milestone. In November 2019, the first Finnish doctoral dissertation focusing specifically on restorative approaches and mediation in schools was completed, when I earned my PhD in Philosophy at the University of Lapland. The Restorative Encounter model developed through the dissertation reflects, in many ways, the years of development in school mediation and the expertise with which Finnish education professionals have embraced restorative and mediation-based approaches in their daily work. And later, in accordance with the GT-methodology of my doctoral research, I have successfully transferred the Restorative Encounter model to other environments both in working life and in different organizations.

Most recently, further research-based support has come through national evaluations. Both Verso (peer mediation) and MiniVerso in early childhood education were included in studies conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (KARVI/FINEEC) in 2021-2024.

The evaluation reports strongly reinforce the findings of my doctoral research as well as the yearly statistics gathered from the field. The VERSO Program strengthens children’s and young people’s participation and sense of being heard, provides an effective way to address conflicts and bullying, and increases feelings of safety in both early childhood education and schools.

“To date, thousands of children and young people have learned mediation skills during their early day care and school years and have already transferred their skills when they move on to working life and various communities.”

At this point, I want once again to thank everyone working in the field — children and staff in early childhood education, pupils and students in schools and educational institutions, and all education professionals — for the work you do in everyday life within your own communities to strengthen the power of peer support and build interaction skills for life. To date, thousands of children and young people have learned mediation skills during their early day care and school years and have already transferred their skills when they move on to working life and various communities. With this in mind, Verso continues to grow in different areas of society and expands into conflict management practices in different environments. The idea of mediation as a civic skill is gaining ground with the expertise of young actors.

As for myself, after moving into specialist roles, I continue working to make restorative and mediation-based approaches better known — now especially in working life, in parishes and different NGOs. Perhaps, by the time today's children and young people enter the workforce, they will find themselves in workplaces or organizations where mediating everyday conflicts and difficult situations is simply a natural part of working life and a shared strength of the community."

1.3 VERSO Program practices

Restorative practices in Early Childhood Education (MiniVerso)

Restorative dialogue and mediation training designed for early childhood education units (MiniVerso) guides staff in applying restorative practices in everyday situations. Staff use the MiniVerso model, which supports children's expertise and ownership of their conflicts when resolving disputes. All staff members in the unit are trained to apply the model as part of their daily work, and children are introduced to mediation through puppet theater and mediation play.

Peer Mediation (Verso)

The VERSO program's peer mediation (Verso) training provides a mediation model in which trained peer mediators, who are slightly older than the parties involved, help to resolve conflicts between pupils at the earliest possible stage. The work of peer mediators is always supported by a team of adults (aka Verso-adults), consisting of voluntary staff members at the school.

Restorative practices and adult-Led Mediation (RESTO)

Training in restorative practices and mediation (RESTO) equips the school community with the skills for adult-led mediation. In this model, trained staff members mediate situations of hurtful behavior or bullying that are not suitable for peer mediation. In addition to preparing participants for the mediator's role, RESTO training also enables them to facilitate group-building activities, like circles, with a restorative approach, thereby strengthening students' social skills within both teaching and learning contexts.

Sustaining the Practices

The VERSO Program's regional Mentor activities support the sharing of good practices and promote cultural change in schools and early childhood education. Videos, online courses, resource banks, podcasts, and printed materials produced by the program strengthen everyday practices and help them take root. Parents' awareness is enhanced through Parents info sessions and themed parent evenings held both online and on-site in schools and early childhood education units. VERSO's active social media channels (Facebook and Instagram) provide up-to-date information and reminders connected to the annual school cycle.

1.4 Goals of the VERSO Program

The activities of the VERSO Program are aligned with STEA's strategic grant category Crisis Support and Promoting Everyday Safety. The program's goals can be summarized in five main points:

Conflict Resolution Skills in Early Childhood Education (MiniVerso)

Children in early childhood education develop better conflict resolution skills through MiniVerso activities. Everyday disputes and disagreements in the community are addressed using the MiniVerso process. Children are heard and actively involved in resolving situations. They learn to keep the promises they make and transfer these skills into their home environment.

Peer Mediation in Schools (Verso)

Members of learning communities who have received VERSO training are familiar with peer mediation (Verso) in their school. Situations of hurtful behavior and bullying are directed to mediation at the earliest possible stage in everyday school life. Agreements reached in peer mediation, which guide changes in behavior, are followed up together with the parties. Peer mediation leads to a reduction in repeated bullying.

Use of Restorative Methods by Adults (RESTO)

Adults in early childhood education and school communities can actively use restorative practices and adult-led mediation. Pupils feel that their views and experiences are valued when bullying situations are addressed. Everyday conflicts are seen as opportunities for learning. Disputes and conflicts of varying levels are resolved without punishment, together with children and pupils, through restorative circles, mediation or conferencing and the outcomes are monitored to ensure that the bullying does not continue.

Embedding Restorative Practices into Community Culture

In communities implementing the VERSO program, the practices become rooted in the overall culture. Children's rights, equality, and opportunities for participation are strengthened. The restorative culture evolves so that children's and young people's abilities are recognized, and their ownership in addressing bullying is reinforced.

Increasing Parents' Awareness

Parents' awareness of restorative practices and mediation grow. Their understanding of the importance of mediation in supporting children's development of social skills deepens. More parents' value children's participation in handling bullying situations in a non-stigmatizing way.

1.5 Trainings of VERSO Program

The program uses various training formats, such as initiative training with theory and practices, training for maintenance and updating or restarting training if needed. Restart training has increased following the pandemic years, as communities, remembering the positive experiences with Verso, seek to reactivate activities. For example, in 2024, 181 initiative training events were conducted (102 for Verso in schools/institutions and 79 for MiniVerso in early childhood education). Additionally, 45 restart training courses were implemented. To ensure the deeper embedding of activities into daily routines, 190 maintenance trainings were conducted, of which 147 for Verso in schools, 31 for MiniVerso in early childhood education, and 12 for regional MiniVerso or Verso mentor groups.

The MiniVerso initiative empowers early childhood staff to utilize a model that strengthens children's expertise and ownership in resolving their conflicts, while simultaneously fostering interaction and emotional skills. Puppet theater and mediation play are key tools for engaging children in this process.

The Verso training program establishes a mediation model where trained peer mediators (slightly older students) facilitate conflict resolution among students at the earliest possible stage. Their activities are supported by a team of voluntary staff members, that have their own training when starting the Verso activity in their school. The school initiating the activity selects a group of willing students for training, during which the students adopt the task and role of a peer mediator and the practices. At the same time, a group of adults from the school are trained to support the Verso activity. The training is collaborative and students and adults, together with the trainers, plan everyday practices for implementing the activities that are suitable for their school.

The RESTO training equips communities with the capacity for adult-led mediation, addressing conflicts, such as bullying, that may not be suitable for peer mediation. Beyond mediation, Resto training also prepares participants to implement restorative group activities, like circles, that enhance group interaction. Resto-trained adults frequently serve as coordinators and support personnel for mediation activities within their units.

Maintenance support training is designed to train new MiniVerso and Verso practitioners and to cultivate the community's operational culture. Maintenance support meetings provide ongoing assistance to MiniVerso and Verso practitioners, aiding in the embedding and development of activities within their units. Mentoring activities facilitate the sharing of effective practices and promote cultural change. Webinars for parents aim to increase their awareness of mediation activities, foster collaboration between units and homes, and equip parents with mediating tools for use at home.

1.6 Evaluation of the VERSO Program activities by FINEEC

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) conducted an assessment in 2021-2022 of programs used in schools to prevent and address bullying. Of the 27 applicants for different programs, FINEEC selected 7 programs for evaluation; one of them was VERSO program's activity peer mediation (Verso). The purpose of the evaluation was to produce information about various anti-bullying methods, their usability, implementation and effectiveness, as well as good practices for the methods (Rumpu et al. 2022). The main results of evaluation for peer mediation (Verso) activity are:

Usability

From a usability perspective, peer mediation is well-suited for resolving conflicts between pupils and gives them responsibility for managing their own conflicts. Pupils are interested in serving as Verso mediators, and among students, Verso is considered a well-regarded method. According to the evaluation, there is ample training and material available to support the activity, making the model easy to implement in schools.

Implementation

From a sustainability perspective, restorative practices are easy to integrate into teaching and other school activities. The method does, however, require commitment from staff, which, based on the evaluation data, has generally been successfully achieved in schools. Support from school leadership and positive experiences among staff using the method are considered crucial.

Effectiveness

From an effectiveness perspective, the evaluation found that Verso activities increase pupils' responsibility for resolving issues and reaching agreements together. Peer mediation often resolves conflicts between pupils without adult involvement. Most resolved conflicts lead to agreements, and the situations do not recur. The evaluation emphasizes the importance of case-by-case assessment and notes that adult-led Resto mediation is useful for conflicts unsuitable for peer mediation.

In 2023–2024 FINEEC also conducted an evaluation on anti-bullying practices and methods used in early childhood education. The evaluation on anti-bullying activities and the support of children's emotional and communication skills in early childhood education was published in 2024.

The evaluation found that the MiniVerso approach fits well with the operational culture of children's groups and is particularly suitable for children who need additional support. The method's instructions and materials are clear, easy to use, and visually appealing. The evaluation showed that through the MiniVerso approach, children's peer relationships, communication skills, and emotional skills have developed, and children have learned to resolve their conflicts when they are able to participate in MiniVerso activities. (Harkoma et al. 2024).

The activities of VERSO Program



MiniVerso

Early childhood education staff as restorative facilitators and mediators. Children as beneficiaries of mediation.



Verso

Students as peer mediators. School adults as Verso facilitators. Staff and students as users of peer mediation.



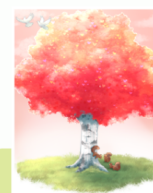
Resto

Education staff as restorative encounterers and mediators. Teachers have practical tools for building a restorative culture.



Maintenance

Trained units as maintainers of restorative culture; including regional mentor groups and responsible actors nationwide.



Parents collaboration

Increasing the awareness of restorative approach and mediation. Conflict management practices for families.

2 OBSERVATIONS FROM THE RESULTS OVER THE YEARS

Annual reports are built upon the annual effectiveness report mandated by STEA (Finnish Social and Health Organization Funding Centre), which serves as a foundational source of data. The VERSO program has achieved an "excellent" effectiveness rating from STEA in recent years, demonstrating a proven positive impact. Annual reports aim to provide a more comprehensive and accessible overview of the program's activities and outcomes, expanding beyond the numerical data collected for STEA's online forms to include qualitative information gathered through surveys and interviews from the field.

The grant decision explicitly outlines the program's purpose: to reduce bullying and disruptive behavior and to manage identified situations in daycare centers, schools, and educational institutions. It also supports peer mediation activities and the related voluntary mediation work of students and staff, as well as restorative practices, through training and information dissemination. In 2025, the program employed 10 trainers and delivered training in Finnish, Swedish, and English.

The VERSO Program actively monitors its effectiveness annually using a multitude of indicators. Surveys are conducted with individuals who have participated in training, with entire communities, and with various field practitioners. In recent years, a particular emphasis has been placed on gathering insights from "end-users," specifically the children and students who are expected to benefit from the VERSO Program's activities. The results of the surveys and interviews are compiled into tables and reports as part of the VERSO team's work, and the reports are published on the VERSO Program's website every autumn.

Many survey questions have been consistently administered for nearly a decade, producing a significant sample size that allows for the observation of trends and changes over time. A notable finding is that despite this long-term monitoring and the annual variation in respondents, the results for many indicators remain remarkably consistent, showing very little annual fluctuation. This stability indicates that the positive outcomes are not fleeting but deeply embedded and reproducible, regardless of changes in participants or external circumstances.

In chapter 2, some results and highlights of the evaluations of past years are presented. The full annual reports are available in Finnish on the VERSO Program's website:

<https://sovittelu.com/vertaissovittelu/vuosiraportit/>

Some examples in numbers:

During past 25 years:

- Total 2,157 MiniVerso units (early childhood) trained
- Total 972 Verso schools (peer mediation) trained
- Total 3,199 Resto-trained adults (adult-led restorative work) trained
- An estimated 16,000 active participants (adults and pupils) carried out restorative practices daily
- Over 36,000 students participated in peer mediation processes every year

2.1 MiniVerso approach in early childhood education

The main expectation is that staff would utilize the restorative work approach and the MiniVerso method, and that they would perceive mediation activities as reducing bullying and increasing a sense of safety within their community. Children were expected to be able to request mediation when conflicts arose, to mediate their disputes with staff support, to actively participate, and to feel heard. Furthermore, children were anticipated to practice mediation skills through play and apply their understanding in their home environments.

2.1.1 Children's opinions are heard

The restorative MiniVerso approach is an integral part of positive education, emphasizing the strengthening of emotional and interaction skills and promoting child participation in pedagogical practices. Early childhood education staff often find the shift away from a "judge" role to be a significant relief, recognizing that understanding conflict ownership empowers them to reinforce and support children's innate capacity to learn, take responsibility, and modify their behavior. MiniVerso training for children utilizes puppet theater to model the mediation process, demonstrating how characters resolve their conflicts with assistance. Following this, staff are guided to facilitate mediation practice through play with children. Regular, varied activities that support children's emotional skills and strengthen peer relationships through play are considered crucial in building sense of community that prevents bullying.

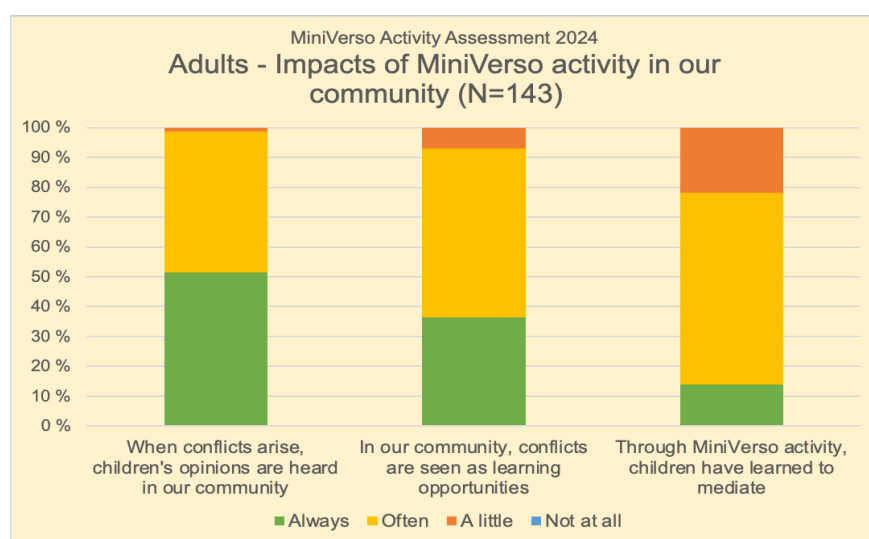


Fig. 3. Impacts of MiniVerso activity in our community

Responses from 143 early childhood educators to the MiniVerso activity survey in 2024 (figure 3.) indicate that mediation activities have successfully found their place as a routine method for addressing conflicts. A high 93% of surveyed staff perceived conflicts as learning opportunities within their community, and 98% reported that children's opinions were heard when conflicts arose.

The consistency in responses between children and adults regarding seeking mediation assistance when conflicts arise further confirms the institutionalization of mediation activities. Interviews with children revealed that 92% ask adults for help in conflict situations, while 96% of adults surveyed reported that children request mediation assistance. Furthermore, 96% of early childhood staff stated that they use mediating language and vocabulary in their daily interactions. The survey data also

indicates that 97% of respondents use MiniVerso in conflict situations always, often, or sometimes, signifying that experienced conflicts and upsets are indeed being addressed through MiniVerso.

2.1.2 Children reported: our play continued after mediation

Children report upholding their promises after MiniVerso mediation, indicating behavioral change and the continuation of play. In fact, 94% of children stated they kept the promise they had made in MiniVerso. The following figure 4. details what happened after mediation from the children's perspective.

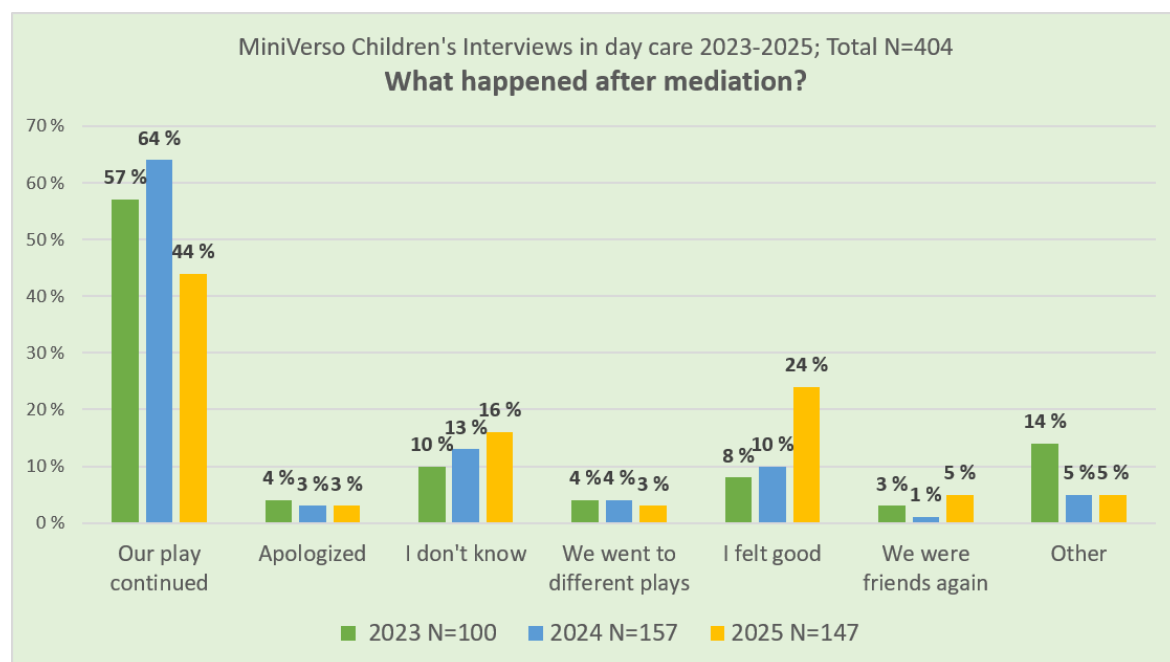


Fig. 4. What happened after mediation 2023-2025

The response from children that "our play continued" after mediation (from 44% to 64% of answers) can be seen as a positive indicator of the program's success in restoring normalcy and positive social interaction. This is a practical and child-centric outcome, signifying that the program effectively minimizes disruption and facilitates the quick return to positive engagement. The Early Childhood Education Plan (2022) mandates intervention and prevention of bullying as key tasks, requiring children to practice social and emotional skills and constructive conflict resolution.

Cooperation between staff and children is a central component of anti-bullying efforts. A remarkable 99% of staff reported working with children in a non-shaming manner, which significantly contributes to positive staff-child cooperation, prevents labeling in conflict situations, strengthens children's sense of participation, and encourages them to seek adult help when needed.

The results from the MiniVerso surveys reveal that most early childhood educators perceive MiniVerso activities as effective in reducing bullying and increasing safety. Specifically, 73% of the 143 respondents in 2024 survey felt MiniVerso activities reduced bullying, and 77% felt they increased safety within the community. Staff responses consistently highlight the growing importance of listening to children, respecting children's own thoughts and solutions, and a shift towards a more mediating approach by educators. These represent key desired impacts of MiniVerso activities from a children's rights perspective: the application of a restorative approach and mediation in early childhood education significantly enhances the elements of being heard and participation in daily activities.

Achieving cultural change is a demanding and time-consuming process. Mastering and maintaining a new method requires considerable collective inquiry, exploration, and practice. Early childhood educators emphasize that initiating MiniVerso activities demands commitment, focus, and responsibility from adults. Children will not engage in new practices unless adults give their support by serving as role models. Adopting a new approach necessitates both the courageous and enthusiastic commitment of individual educators to the change process, as well as the open-minded dedication of teams and the entire community. Educators' comments illustrate these points:

- *"Provides tools for professional work. When using MiniVerso, one can clearly see children's individual differences and how to act accordingly."*
- *"Children's mutual blaming has almost completely stopped in the group."*
- *"Team members' attitude towards conflict situations has changed. We don't dictate what to do or look for a culprit, we observe the situation and resolve the conflict by discussing. Some children remain sad after the situation, in which case the educator's hug and comfort help."*
- *"Starting MiniVerso activity requires educators' commitment and self-reflection and change in their own actions."*

An early childhood educator's comment further illustrates this shift: "Children have noticed how often a conflict arose from a misunderstanding. So, we have learned to talk to each other more, and not automatically just complain to the educator. So, when someone does something they don't like, they can say it directly to the other child instead of just complaining to the educator." This highlights a fundamental behavioral shift towards proactive communication and problem-solving.

2.2 Peer mediation in schools (Verso)

The main expectation is that Verso practices would be communicated to students, staff, and parents, and that peer mediation would be consistently used as a method for managing conflicts. It was anticipated that peer mediation would almost invariably lead to agreements and behavioral changes, with most parties reporting that they upheld their promises and that the situation improved. Furthermore, students were expected to perceive an increase in safety due to Verso activities, and staff were expected to find that Verso effectively addresses the daily needs for bullying prevention and management within the community.

2.2.1 The cases mediated in peer mediation

What is mediated in Peer Mediation by trained pupils? According to schools, in 2024, cases referred to peer mediation based on case-by-case considerations were mainly verbal (47%) and physical (35%). Verbal cases include name-calling, gossiping, and talking behind the back (Fig. 5). Bringing physical cases to peer mediation often causes discussion in the school community. Sometimes a school decides that any type of physical cases can be mediated in Verso – while the majority of schools take the policy that 'student-sized' cases can be mediated in Verso. This means, in physical situations, for example pushing, shoving, slapping or pinching.

It is important to keep in mind that a trained staff member is always responsible for deciding on a case-by-case basis whether to mediate the case with peers or adults. And also, the expertise of peer mediators is often used: before taking the case to mediate also peer mediators are asked if they see the case suitable to peer mediation. Over the years, peer mediation activities take on their own school-specific form and practice, where the expertise of both adults and students becomes to good use in a best way.

As opened in Figure 5, there was a total of 2,814 cases reported in the 2024 survey, with responses from 118 different schools. Respondents gave 2986 natures to these cases, which means that in some cases there had been more than one type of harmful behavior between the parties. The results show that peer mediators can handle different cases. Staff can make case-specific decisions, trust the capabilities of peer mediators, and at the same time reduce the burden of resolving everyday conflicts together with students.

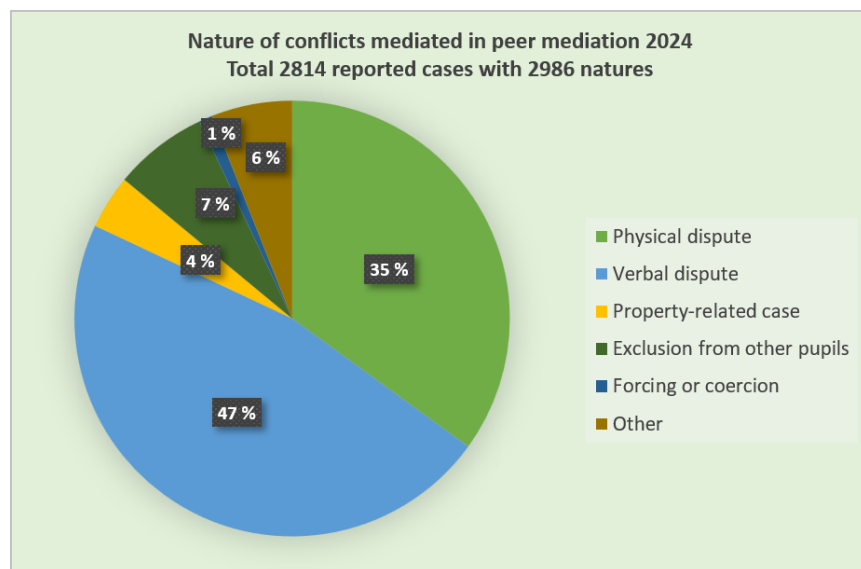


Fig. 5. Nature of conflicts mediated in peer mediation 2024 (responses from 118 schools)

2.2.2 Why is peer activity (Verso) important in schools?

A survey conducted in 2024 among parties involved in Verso mediation included the multiple-choice statement: "It's good to have peer mediation in school." A compelling observation emerged when comparing responses from those who felt their situation *had* improved after mediation with those who felt it *had not*. Even among the latter group, a substantial 91% still agreed that it is beneficial to have peer mediation available in school. This indicates that even when individual outcomes are not perfect, the program's underlying principles (e.g., no punishment, participation) are broadly appreciated.

The following figure 6 (next page) illustrates the differing priorities between students and adults regarding the importance of Verso activities. Students (N=525) and adults (N=138) were asked to select the three most important aspects of Verso.

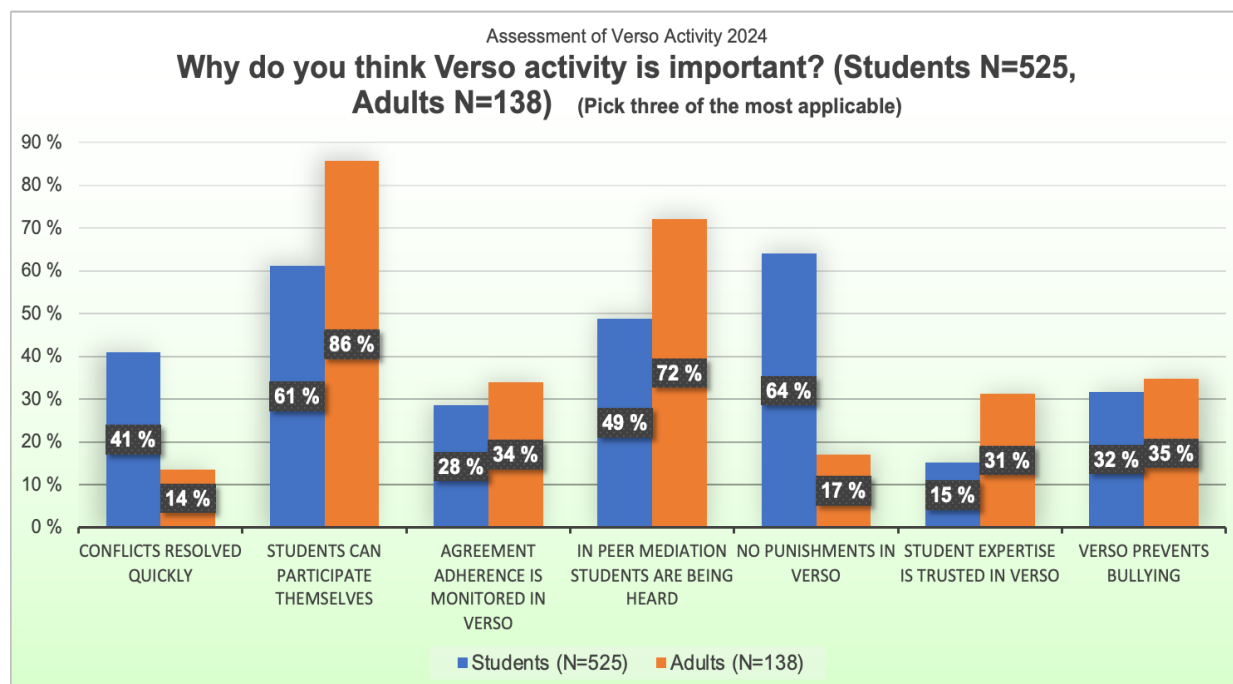


Fig. 6. Why is Verso activity important?

In Figure 6, the divergence in priorities between students and adults is noteworthy. Students primarily valued the absence of punishments (64%) and the opportunity for self-participation (61%), followed by quick conflict resolution (41%). This reflects their immediate concerns and desire for practical, immediate benefits. In contrast, adults prioritized student participation (86%) and students being heard (72%). This highlights different motivational drivers and perceptions of success.

2.2.3 In peer mediation parties are listened to

In schools, students who have been parties in peer mediation complete a survey after the mediation session. Totally 738 parties to peer mediation from various parts of Finland gave their opinions in 2018-2024.

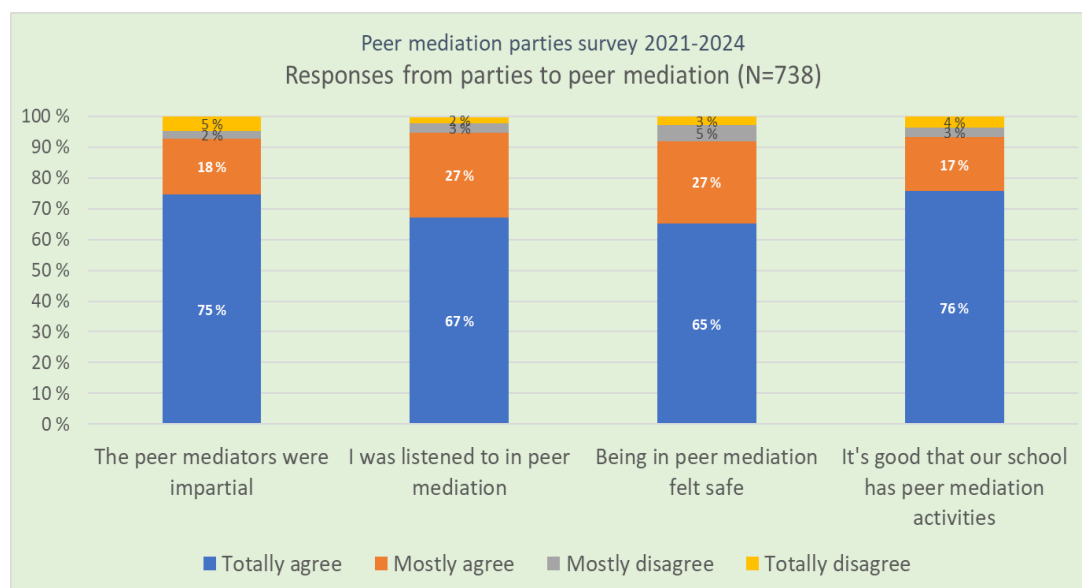


Fig. 7. The opinions of parties (N=738) in peer mediation 2018-2024

The results show that the students who were involved in peer mediation felt that the restorative principles had been implemented well or quite well (Fig 7).

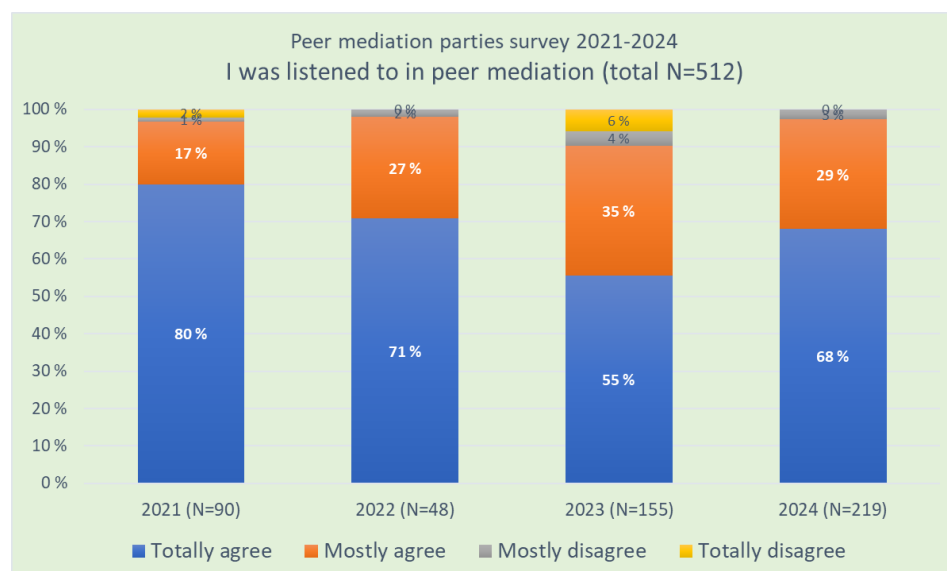


Fig. 8. I was listened to in peer mediation – results 2021-2024

The experience of being heard is considered a significant factor within the restorative approach. Figure 8 illustrates the experiences of peer mediation parties regarding whether they felt heard over a four-year period (total N=512). While there is some annual variation, it is significant that parties in peer mediation almost always agree or mostly agree with the statement "I was listened to in peer mediation".

A deeper analysis reveals how experiences during mediation influence students' overall opinions of peer mediation activities. The experience of "being listened to" appears to hold greater significance for students' overall positive opinion of the program than even the resolution of their own conflict, reinforcing the core restorative principle that the process of being heard is as crucial, if not more so, than the specific outcome. The observation that the experience of being heard profoundly impacts the opinion of mediation's overall benefit suggests that focusing on how parties feel heard after mediation could influence how they experience the mediation's effectiveness and its personal impact. Students who felt that mediators acted partially were slightly more critical of the program's overall benefit. A more pronounced difference was observed among students who disagreed with the statement "I was listened to in peer mediation".

2.2.4 Agreements reached in peer mediation are respected

Based on four years of monitoring, it has been found that approximately a quarter of pupils have participated in peer mediation to resolve their own conflict in the schools that responded to the survey. Once peer mediation is initiated, agreements are almost always reached. Schools utilizing peer mediation annually report statistics on the frequency of agreements and their adherence.

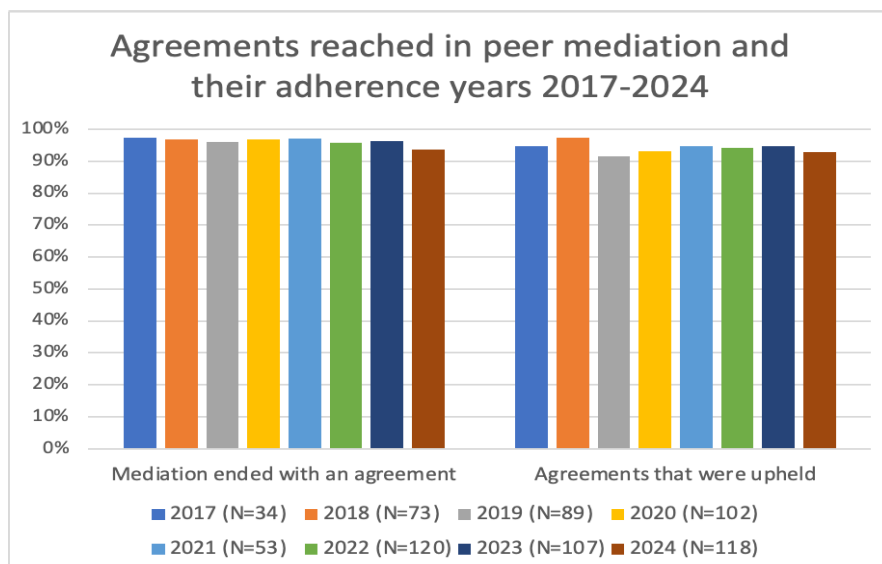


Fig. 9. Agreements reached and upheld in peer mediation (N=number of responded schools per year)

Figure 9 above presents the views of responding schools from 2017-2024, representing a sample of 696 school responses over eight years. Combined, 96% of peer mediations result in an agreement, and in 94% of these cases, the agreement is upheld within the follow-up period.

In 2023 the survey sought answers on how the parties experienced the situation changing after peer mediation (Fig 10). 155 students who were involved in peer mediation responded to the survey. 82% of respondents totally or mostly agreed with the statement that the situation had improved after mediation. 86% of the parties totally or mostly agreed that they had been able to resolve their dispute themselves. 81% of the parties totally or mostly agreed that the dispute had not recurred. In accordance with the peer mediation practice, if it is found that the desired change has not been achieved, the situation refers to adults for mediating or to other school procedures according to the case-specific considerations.

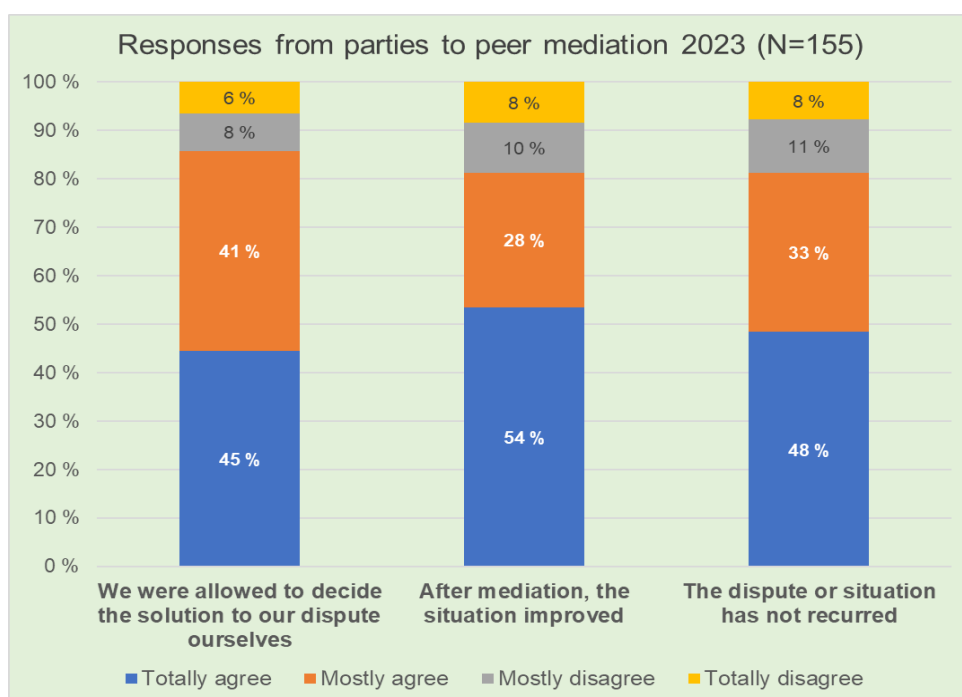


Fig. 10. Parties' responses to questions about the outcome of peer mediation

With these positive results of peer mediation, the proportion of students utilizing Verso for conflict resolution could potentially be higher. This raises the question of how well Verso activities are known within schools. Responses from Verso practitioners from 2021-2024 indicate varying levels of awareness. Students generally perceive awareness more positively than school adults. Results show that continuous awareness-raising is an important part of the activities.

2.3 Adult-led restorative activities in education and early childhood education

Over the years, the adult-led activities of the VERSO Program have been abbreviated as RESTO. The main expectation is that RESTO-trained staff would conduct mediations weekly or monthly, and that these mediations would consistently or frequently result in agreements that were upheld upon follow-up. Restorative circles were also expected to be utilized weekly or monthly. Children and students were anticipated to perceive mediation as a safe method for conflict resolution, to feel heard, and to have influence over the solutions. Both adults and students were expected to value the participation of children and young people in maintaining a peaceful learning environment.

2.3.1 Restorative activities are used in daily practice

The core objective of the VERSO Program is for adults in early childhood and school communities to effectively utilize restorative methods and to view daily conflicts as learning opportunities, with children's and students' experiences at the forefront. The restorative approach involves resolving issues through discussion of feelings and needs, without punishment, and in collaboration with all involved parties. This adult-led mediation serves to support and complement peer mediation, leading in many cases to the cessation of experienced bullying.

A 2024 survey on RESTO activities was completed by 210 RESTO-trained practitioners. The results indicate active utilization of the acquired skills: 48% of respondents reported using the adult-led mediation process monthly, and 26% used mediation weekly. Other restorative methods practiced during training, such as various circles, were utilized almost daily or weekly by 26% of respondents, and monthly by 58%.

The survey results show that adult-led RESTO mediations primarily address conflicts between children or students, as expected. However, it is noteworthy that respondents also reported RESTO mediations involving conflicts between students and adults, sometimes including parents, and even conflicts among staff members, particularly in early childhood education settings. This highlights the versatility of the RESTO approach in fostering a restorative culture across various relationships within the educational community.

2.3.2 Paying attention to emotions and needs increases understanding

The demand for RESTO training has consistently increased throughout its existence, and the range of professional groups participating in the training has broadened. The role of these trained adults, who are proficient in mediating and restorative approaches, is important in upholding the rights of children and students in daily life and in conflict situations. Concurrently, these trainings bolster the maintenance of MiniVerso and Verso activities and strengthen communities' commitment to developing a restorative culture.

While the topics discussed in trainings vary by group and over time, the core principles identified by participants have remained remarkably consistent. When asked to choose the three most important

aspects of the restorative approach for themselves, year after year respondents (total N=822) consistently highlighted the following:

1. Processing feelings and needs increases understanding (chosen yearly by about 75-80% of respondents).
2. Things can be handled by talking together (~ 60-65%).
3. Seeing daily conflicts as learning opportunities (~ 50-55%).

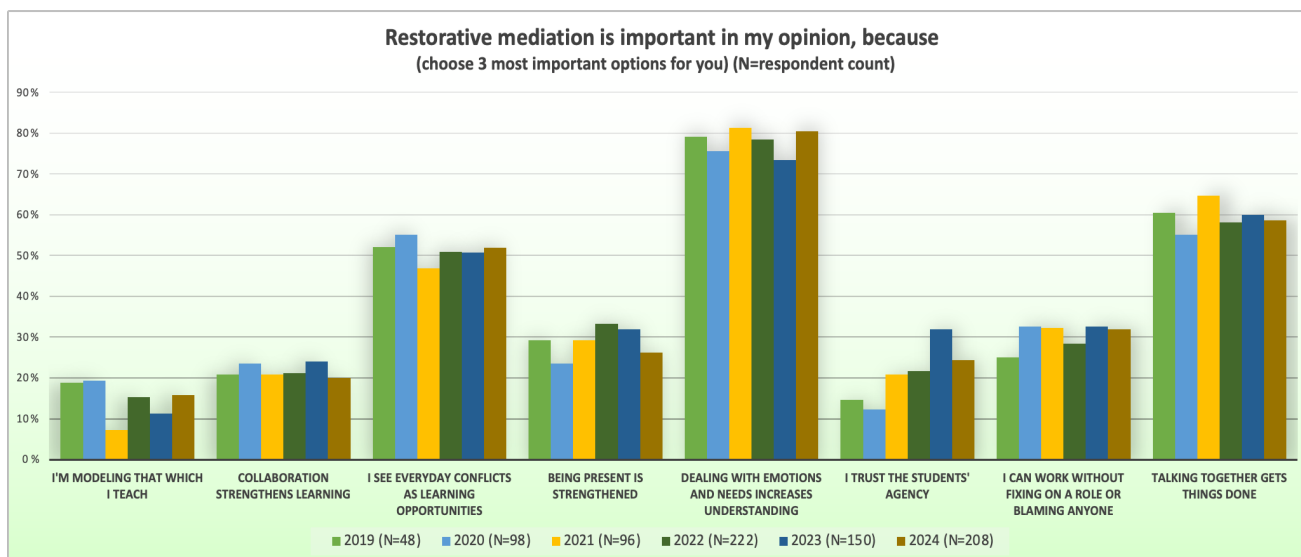


Fig. 11. Restorative mediation is important because...

The consistency of this "top three" across multiple years (2019-2024) is a significant finding. It demonstrates a good understanding of the core principles of restorative justice among trained professionals. This shows that the training of VERSO-program opens well the fundamentals of restorative approach, not just the methods which are important in building and maintaining a restorative school culture.

When asked about the nature of adult led mediation (RESTO) cases, the view was that the situation mediated in adult-led mediation has in most cases included verbal harassment; 93% of respondents said they had mediated verbal disputes (see figure 12 below).

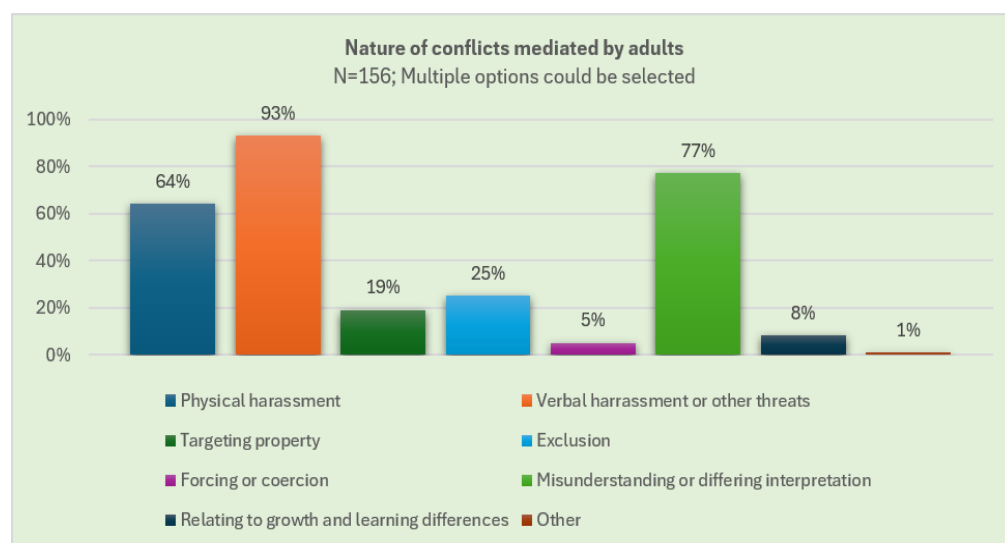


Fig. 12. Nature of conflicts mediated in adult led RESTO-mediation

Figure 12 shows that also misunderstandings or misinterpretations (77%) and physical harassment (64%) cases were common in adult-led mediation. However, it is also worth noting that sometimes in adult led mediations the parties to the conflict are a student and an adult, sometimes parents are also involved, and in addition, situations between staff have also been mediated.

When asking about agreements, 97% of respondents to the 2024 survey said that an agreement has always or often been reached in Resto mediation. 2% of respondents felt that an agreement is rarely reached, and 1 respondent had chosen the option that no agreements have been reached at all. In these cases, the situation will be referred to other school procedures so that the case does not remain unhandled. RESTO mediation, like other forms of mediation, includes a follow-up meeting.

However, an agreement is not necessarily the best measure of the success of mediation. What is essential is that some change in the actions of the parties occurs. The change may be, for example, that an action that hurt the other person ceases, or that understanding from the other person's perspective increases, or the atmosphere in the entire group improves. According to the restorative perspective, the outcome of restorative mediation is an agreement on change – most often a change in behavior, the implementation of which is monitored. The results show that in learning communities, restorative mediation produces this desired change very well.

2.4 Support for activity maintenance and strengthening of operational culture

In 2024, 14 active regional Mentor groups operated across Finland. These groups involved a fluctuating number of 100-200 mentors, including adults, children, and students. 80% of mentor groups reported a strengthening of their mediation expertise through mentoring, and 60% felt that children's rights were reinforced through these activities. All responding mentor groups indicated that the experience of participation was strengthened through mentoring. Furthermore, 75% of school adults (N=136) agreed that mediation activities strengthened the culture of participation within their units.

Mentor groups conducted several independent meetings throughout the year, and VERSO Program trainers participated in a total of nine mentor group meetings. The activities of these groups had a noticeable impact on the embedding of mediation as an operational culture: four groups reported that their commitment to mediation had increased significantly due to mentoring.

Educational institutions largely feel supported by VERSO Program materials for maintaining their mediation activities. A combined 66% of early childhood and school staff reported receiving good support from VERSO materials for MiniVerso and Verso activities. The goal of the VERSO program is to transfer expertise of the approach to units so that they can operate independently, utilizing the material and support provided by the VERSO program. Program materials have been developed and continuously updated based on feedback and needs from the field, and all materials are electronically accessible to trained units. This includes e-learning courses, informational materials, videos, podcasts, and training materials.

2.5 Involving parents in activities

The main expectation is that parents would feel adequately informed about VERSO Program practices. Their understanding of mediation's importance in a child's social development and in handling conflicts would increase. Parents learn to see the VERSO Program as contributing to prevention of bullying by enhancing participation. Staff readiness to lead parents' meetings and discuss restorative

and mediation practices with parents was also expected to strengthen. The aim is that parents would understand and value the key principles of restorative justice.

Parents were reached through an electronic survey distributed by the units upon request. Responses were received in 2024 from 224 parents, some with children in early childhood education, some in schools, and some in both. Among the parents surveyed, 54% considered it important that their child is being heard in conflict situations, and 39% felt it was important for their child to participate in resolving their own conflicts. Furthermore, 24% of parents valued their child being recognized as an expert in their own experience. Some parents have observed that their children have transferred mediation skills to their home or other leisure environments. VERSO Program trainers frequently hear anecdotal accounts of this phenomenon, such as peer mediators applying their mediation expertise or parts of it within their hobbies and peer groups.

The expectations are reached quite well. According to the survey results the program has increased parents' understanding of the significance of mediation in a child's social growth and in handling various conflicts and bullying situations. Parents increasingly perceive the VERSO Program as a method for preventing experienced bullying that enhances children's and students' participation. Furthermore, the readiness of staff to conduct parent meetings and engage in discussions with parents about VERSO Program practices has strengthened. The results of the parent survey indicate that parents generally value the key principles of restorative justice, suggesting a fertile ground for developing stronger home-school partnerships if communication improves.

On the other hand, further work is needed to promote information for parents. In a survey also asked for parents' views on whether the information received was sufficient. The results show that there is still strong need to increase sharing information with parents in different ways. 57% of responding parents reported receiving little or quite a little information about MiniVerso/Verso activities, and an additional 18% stated they had received no information at all. This totals 75% of parents with limited or no awareness, indicating a substantial communication gap. The result shows that one of the development goals is to expand information channels so that as many parents and families as possible are reached in the future.

2.6 VERSO Program reduces bullying and increases safety

Early childhood education adults are regularly surveyed about the impact of MiniVerso on reducing bullying within their groups (Fig 13). Most respondents perceive MiniVerso as effective in reducing bullying. Over the years 2022-2025, between 64-75% of respondents felt MiniVerso reduced bullying a lot or quite a lot. This is a positive finding, as effective intervention in bullying at the early childhood stage is vital for children's and the community's well-being, and it can also prevent bullying from escalating later in schooling.

Safety is a widely discussed topic in education. The VERSO Program uses participants' perceptions of how much VERSO activities contribute to increased safety as a key indicator. In early childhood education, adults have been asked for three consecutive years about their experience of increased safety due to MiniVerso activities. Between 70-80% of respondents felt MiniVerso increased safety a lot or quite a lot (Fig 14).

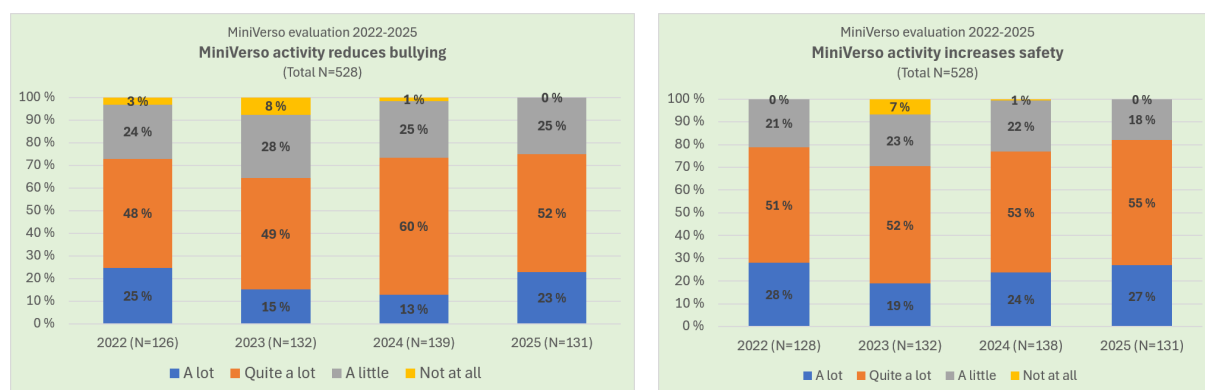


Fig. 13 and 14. MiniVerso in early day care reduces bullying and increases safety

In schools, the question of increased safety has been posed to both students and adults over five years. It is interesting to compare their differing perspectives. According to figure 15, from 80% to 95% of students in 2021–2025 reported that VERSO program's activities had increased safety at their school a lot or quite a lot. According to the annual comparison, students' experience of safety has remained almost the same from year to year.

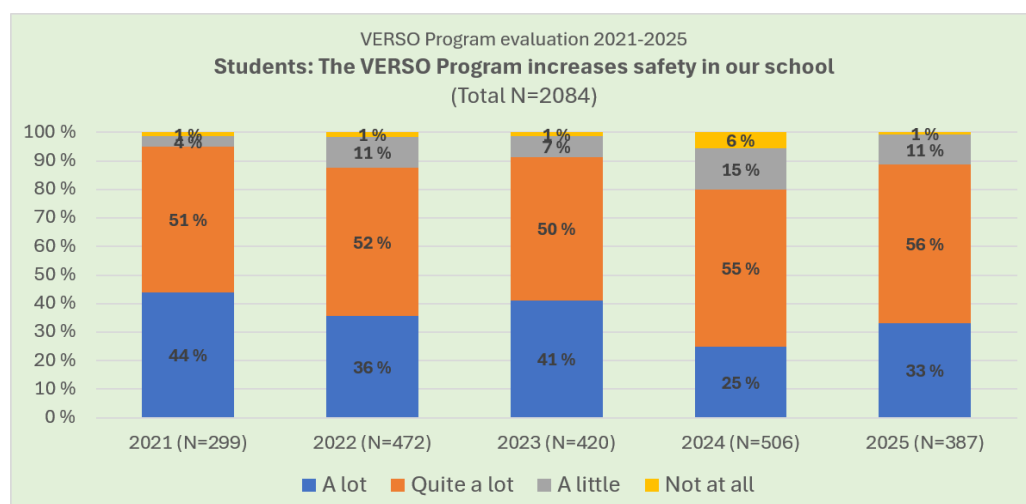


Fig. 15. VERSO Program increases safety – opinions of students (total N=2084)

Figure 16 (next page) shows the views of the staff. First, it is noteworthy that the adults' experience of safety clearly differs from the students' views. It is also significant to note the staff's experience of a decrease in safety. This shift may be partly attributed to a more challenging school environment and hardening societal attitudes. In recent years, the debate about the deterioration of safety experiences among teaching staff has been widely discussed.

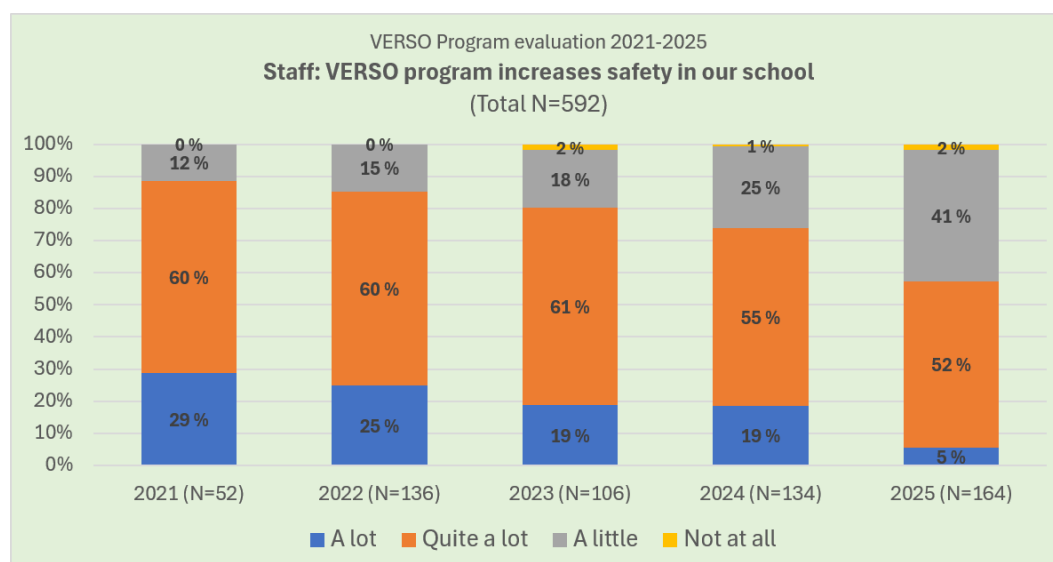


Fig. 16. VERSO Program increases safety – opinions of staff (total N=592)

It is worrying that the tone of the discussions has hardened and there is an increasing demand for the addition of criminal offenses and punishments to the school environment as well. With experiences of violence, the increase in these thoughts is understandable. However, there is a danger that the voice and expertise of children and young people will once again go unheard. In challenging times, there is a need to define phenomena and seek solutions in accordance with the realities of adults - in which case the experience of children and young people often remains in the shadows and unheard.

It is therefore important to highlight and underline the views produced by children and young people. Considering the evaluation chapters opened above, it would be important to note that young people are active and capable actors, whose own participation increases their experience of safety. The views of the parties to peer mediation also support these results of the experience of student's safety (Fig 17 and 18).

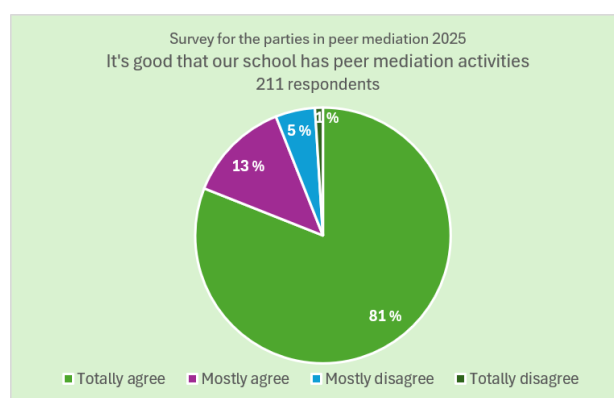
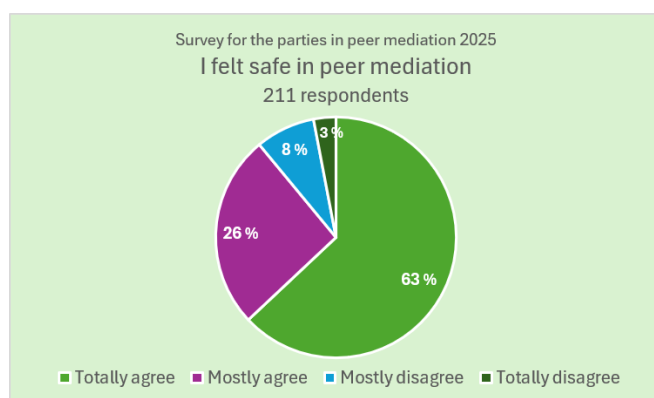


Fig. 17 and 18. Results of survey 2025 for parties: Fig 17: "I felt safe in peer mediation"; Fig 18: "It's good that our school has peer mediation"

As shown in Figures 17 and 18, most participants in peer mediation feel that mediation is safe. Similarly, the majority of students who have participated in peer mediation consider it good that there is a peer mediation activity at school.

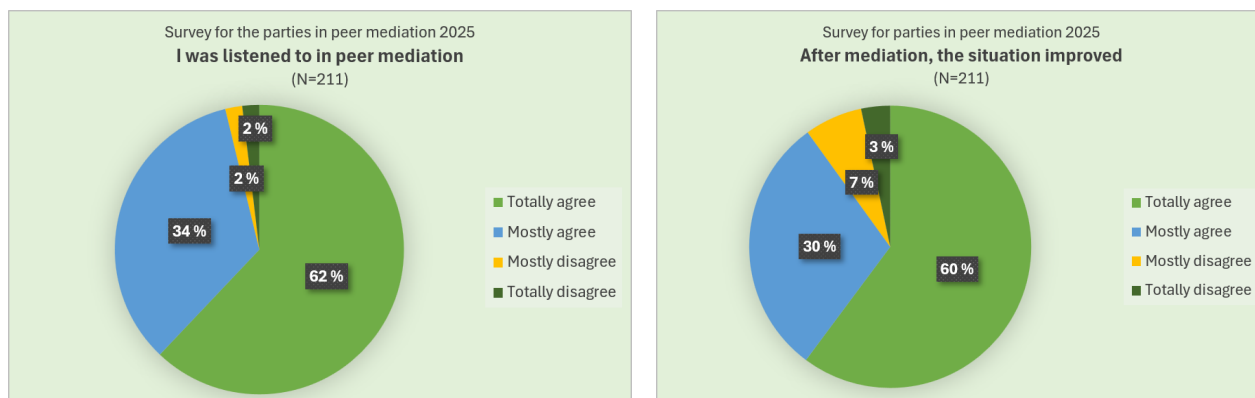


Fig. 19 and 20. Results of survey 2025 for parties: Fig 18: *"I was listened to in peer mediation"*; Fig 19: *"After mediation, the situation improved"*

Figures 19 and 20 above show that the experiences of the parties in being heard and resolving conflict support the view of the students' abilities and the importance of equality when securing everyday working peace in schools. The cooperation of the students and the staff has also made it possible to detect so-called latent conflicts so that they can be mediated before they escalate. Equally, evaluations have shown it to be important that schools following the VERSO program always have a team of staff conducting case-specific assessments, supporting peer mediation activities, and arranging adult-led mediation when necessary.

However, the results shown in Figure 21 highlight for us the importance of listening to students' views.

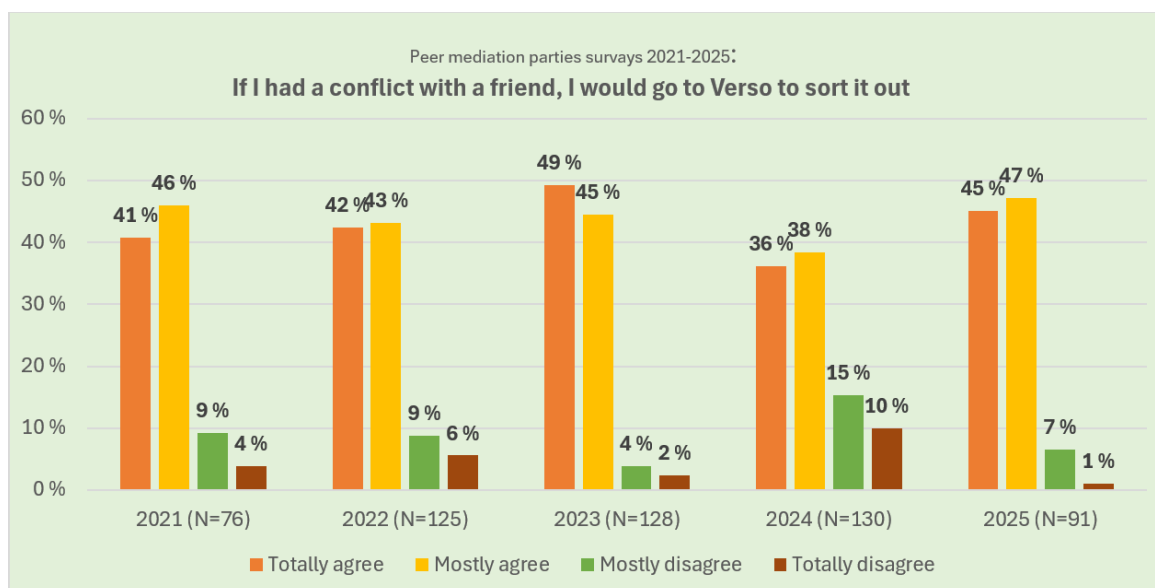


Fig. 21. The opinions of the parties to peer mediation about using Verso again in conflict situations.

Figure 21 opens the opinions of using mediation again to solve the conflict. The students' positive experience and ability to take responsibility for their own behavior is illustrated year after year by the result that the parties to mediation are ready to utilize mediation again if conflicts arise. If most students who participated in peer mediation choose peer mediation again to resolve their own conflict, it is our responsibility as adults to make this possible.

3 SUMMARY AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

3.1 The restorative culture in schools and early childhood education

Restorative practices like circles, peer mediation and adult-led mediation in education and early childhood education are generating promising results in Finland. The rights of the child to be heard and to participate in a way that influences decision-making are also well respected when the restorative principles are followed in daily practice. On the other hand, we can ask whether the results are promising because of the use of restorative methods alone or whether we need a more comprehensive restorative approach and change of school or day care culture to ensure that the full benefits of a restorative approach.

What values and principles are required in implementing a whole school restorative approach? This was the main questions that guided doctoral research of Maija Gellin (2019) after 15 years of experience as a restorative approach trainer in Finnish schools. The results of the research provide a perspective on the discourse of well-being and conflict management in school communities. Both successes and challenges were reported. According to the results, the restorative approach had influenced the mindset of the teachers so that they adopted respectful encounters, active listening, restorative circles and mediation in their daily profession and pedagogy. The data shows that the restorative approach has changed the attitudes of the teachers towards pupils in a way that children were seen as being actively involved in matters concerning their own lives. Restorative mediation was experienced as a positive and cooperative approach to conflict (Gellin 2019: 6-7).

The restorative approach had changed the way the participants in a conflict were seen. Instead of naming the “bullies” or “victims”, the teacher, as a restorative facilitator, could work without labelling the parties and could support their capability to solve their conflict themselves. The teachers observed that after changing from a punitive role to a facilitative role, it was significantly easier to support the parties in their efforts to keep their promises and change their behavior. The data confirmed the necessity of proper training to achieve success in implementing a restorative approach. The interviewees considered the training they had received to be of very high quality (Gellin, 2019: 163-164).

The results also showed the challenges of implementing new restorative thinking and practices. The critical attitudes of some school staff members and parents sometimes made it difficult to use these practices. Not all adults are ready to change the sanction-based methods to restorative ones. Further, some adults could not trust the active role and expertise of pupils or participatory methods used in the restorative approach. The interviewees realized that the adoption of new practices requires planning and training but reported that there was not always time for that. The results indicate that sharing reflections and information with colleagues regularly is essential in implementing the restorative approach in daily school practices (Gellin, 2019: 162).

As a result of PhD research, a model for Restorative Encounter, as a formal grounded theory, was created. The Restorative Encounter is always a two-way process with three dimensions. It includes the adoption of restorative thinking, the understanding of restorative participation as a key factor in line with children’s rights, and the use of restorative mediation as a conflict management method.

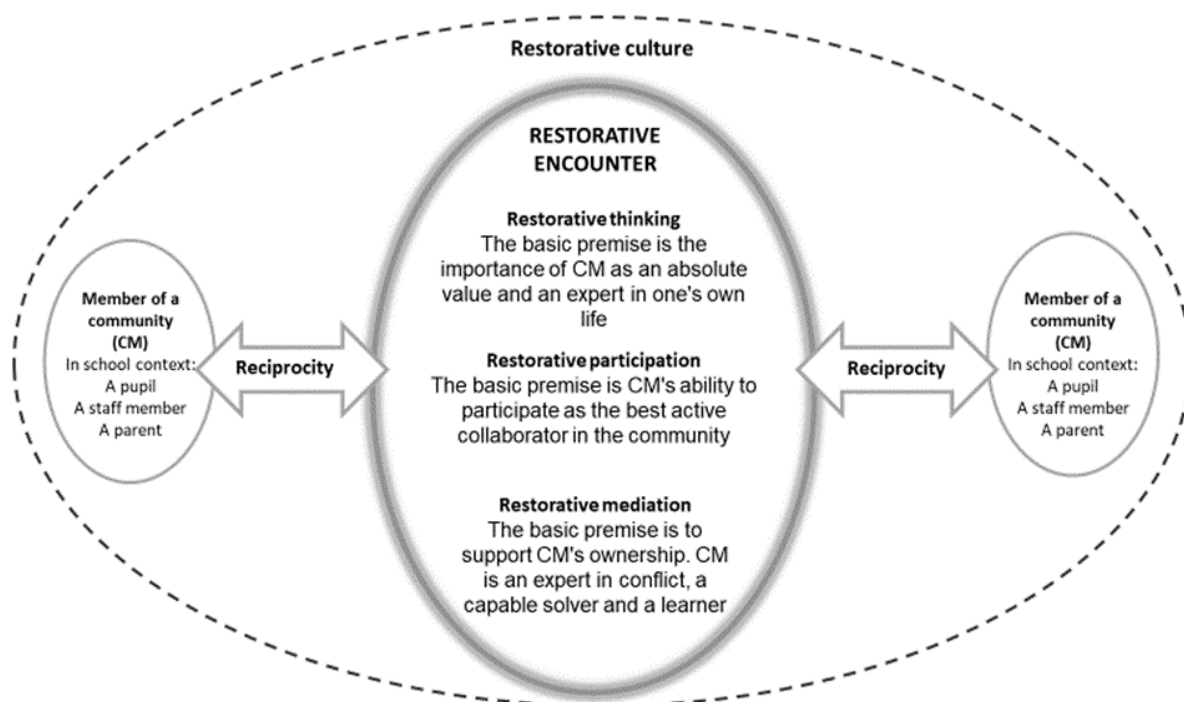


Fig. 22. The dimensions of the restorative encounter (Gellin, 2019: 156).

Figure 22 illustrates the dimensions of a restorative encounter. *Restorative thinking* emphasizes the view that the individual is valued as an expert in their own life and experiences without preconceived notions. This means that in encounters and interactions, community members (CM) value each other as they are, making it possible to listen to each other and understand their perspectives, even if they do not agree on everything. The experience of being valued and heard reinforces and maintains CMs' own image. In this way, restorative thinking also strengthens human relationships in encounters at different levels.

Restorative participation culminates in collaborative action in daily life in schools. Encounters and interactions take place in positions where individuals are in their community. Through restorative participation, the identities of the participators are respected as such regardless of their positions. All members of a community are seen as actors who can develop and learn through successes and failures in their cooperation with others.

The basic principle in *restorative mediation* is that conflicts are understood to be related to social relations and that they are thus accepted as part of human growth. When a conflict is experienced, the situation is understood as an opportunity for change that strengthens an individual's growth and learning. Restorative encounters do not stigmatize, but instead there is a mutual interest in increasing the understanding of CM so that solutions support the development of CMs' self-image and capability to take responsibility and accountability for behavior and agreements. By strengthening these three dimensions when developing professional skills of school staff and social skills of children, schools can succeed in changing the school culture into an encompassing restorative school approach where children's rights are respected.

3.2 The restorative culture as a support for participation and well-being

The VERSO Program actively promotes a restorative approach and mediation practices within the Finnish education field. The results consistently demonstrate that the restorative approach strengthens a sense of community, fosters participation, and enhances emotional skills. These elements, in turn, build a sense of safety within communities. The most important actors in the VERSO Program are the individuals in the field: the children, young people, and adults who implement restorative activities daily within their own communities. Restorative school culture emphasizes collaborative work and considering the needs of all community members in building collective well-being.

Through over 25 years of sustained effort in the field, the VERSO Program has successfully brought restorative approach and practices for bullying prevention work in early childhood education, basic education, and secondary education. Its activities have been implemented in over 200 municipalities across Finland. STEA has rated the program as highly effective for several years. Both MiniVerso and Verso activities have undergone evaluation by FINEEC (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre), which has provided valuable feedback and strengthened the core objectives of the program, highlighting its relevance in educational and early childhood education communities.

In alignment with broader societal trends, the education and early childhood education field is actively seeking methods to de-escalate polarization between individuals and population groups. Encounter skills are central in restorative approach: the aim is to meet others from the perspective of their own reality, genuinely interested in their way of seeing and experiencing the world. This principle applies to all human relationships—among children and adults, and across generations. It is crucial to learn these encounter skills from childhood, as they enable individuals to listen to different perspectives and recognize potential unconscious prejudices in their own thinking. While these are complex topics, it would be an underestimation of children and young people, if we are not practicing these skills collaboratively with them. By doing so, collective learning can occur, individuals can reflect on their own thinking, and in this way increase empathy and humanity in their own communities.

This work is performed daily in the field. Children, students, and adults in units that follow VERSO Program supports the aims of early childhood education and educational curriculum plans: participation, interaction, and broad-based social competence goals. The restorative approach and mediation concretely support these objectives. The VERSO program lives and grows with social development, and thousands of children, young people and adults who are encountered in the field every year participate in the continuous development of the program. The VERSO Program is not merely a method; it is a way of building a listening and participatory restorative culture one encounter after another, within the daily life of early childhood education or schools. As said VERSO Program has grown into an approach to use along life for life.

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