SUMMARY

Below we summarise the most important results by answering the research questions.

Research questions

What exactly does peer mediation involve and what are the characteristics of the variants that can be discerned?
Peer mediation is a structured process in which pupils act as neutral third parties and offer support to their fellow pupils in finding solutions to their conflicts. With regard to the core of peer mediation and the various steps that are distinguished, different programmes appear to overlap. However, at the same time variations can be discerned at several levels. There are programmes in which all pupils are trained to manage conflicts constructively (total school approach) and programmes in which only a part of the pupils are trained to serve as peer mediators (cadre approach). In the Netherlands only the cadre approach is used. As a matter of fact, peer mediation can be embedded in various ways, it can be a relatively isolated activity (particularly in secondary education) or it can be linked to broader activities in the area of conflict management and manners (particularly primary education).

What is the role of parents and the role of the school (teachers, school management) with regard to this?
In general, the role of parents in peer mediation is very limited. They are informed of the selection of peer mediators and their permission is asked with respect to this, but there is no further involvement on their part. The role of the school and in particular that of the coordinator is highly important in peer mediation. Obviously management and team support, together with the enthusiasm and expertise of the coordinator are important success factors for peer mediation. The support of the management is essential, because the management is responsible for the structural supply of means and deployment of manpower that are needed in order to realise the programme. Support within the team is important as peer mediation largely depends on the extent to which teachers refer quarrelling pupils to the peer mediators. A major bottleneck within many schools is that quarrelling pupils are not referred to peer mediators often enough, because teachers tend to solve quarrels in their own ways. Therefore, coordinators at various schools, in consultation with the pupils, look for ways to improve the referring practice.

What other activities are carried out with regard to conflict management?
When we focus solely on conflicts between pupils, we find that sometimes flanking or other programmes provide pupils with the chance to develop the skills they need to avoid conflicts or resolve them in reasonable ways. We've

also come across variants such as restorative mediation. The differences between this form of mediation and peer mediation are limited. Besides, restorative mediation is hardly ever applied in the Netherlands.

When we regard conflict management in the education sector as a whole, we notice an increasing attention to finding constructive solutions to conflicts between different parties, including pupils, parents, teachers, management and even the neighbourhood.

What are the exact objectives that are being pursued concerning peer mediation?

The objectives that are being pursued, their scope, and the extent to which they have been made explicit, vary from school to school. The objectives are strongly related to the school's situation and the extent to which the programme has been embedded in the school policy. Objectives that have been mentioned do not only concern pupils and peer mediators, but also the school as a whole. Objectives that occur often are:

- resolving conflicts between pupils more quickly;
- increasing pupil involvement;
- teaching social-emotional skills;
- providing an alternative to sanctions;
- providing pupils with the opportunity to communicate with each other even under difficult circumstances;
- improving the atmosphere in school;
- providing a constructive learning environment;
- decreasing the workload of tutors and teachers.

What is the theoretical background of the programme? According to what (theoretical) principles and mechanisms could peer mediation take effect with respect to achieving the set objectives?

The prevailing view of the relevant scientific literature is that peer mediation programmes are mainly based on experience and intuitive insight instead of research results and systematic evaluations. Theoretical explanations cover a wide range of (predominantly psychological) theories. The problem is that part of the cited theories are rather general, or not sufficiently supported by empirical data. An example of a reasonably detailed theory is the conflict strategy theory underlying the TSP-programme (Teaching Students to be Peacemakers) of Johnson en Johnson (1996). The core of this theory is that conflicts are forms of clashes of interest, which, when resolved in a constructive way, can lead to a positive outcome for both parties. This constructive way of resolving conflicts is not applied spontaneously, especially not in competitive environments, and therefore children must learn it at a young age. Important elements of the mediation approach are: exchanging interests, feelings and motives (in order to gain insight in each other's perceptions) on the basis of which solutions can be generated that are optimal for both parties. With regard to peer mediation, a number of rules are added (for example writing down agreements) that should increase the chance for success.

What is the situation regarding the integrity of the programme? In what way(s) is peer mediation applied in practice? Does this correspond to what was intended, both with regard to the content of the programme and reaching the target group?

The first question to be asked with regard to the Dutch situation is to what extent peer mediators follow the structure of a programme. On the basis of the research data we conclude that Dutch schools choose different approaches. For instance, there are differences with regard to the extent to which pupils and teachers receive training, who provides these trainings, how pupils are selected, and what target group is eligible for peer mediation. We've also found that schools adapt training programmes to the school's specific situation. In brief, the way peer mediation is taught varies significantly among schools. On the other hand common characteristics can also be identified. The focus of most trainings is on role-playing and feedback, and the sub-skills in the field of communication that come up for discussion are the same. It turns out from the interviews that the mediation steps are carried out more or less in line with what was taught. However, with regard to realisation in practice we find that there are differences in various areas. On the basis of the twenty schools we cautiously conclude that the integrity of the programme is limited. In certain schools the reach is restricted because mediation doesn't occur often. At schools where mediation occurs more often, respondents state that various different groups make use of mediation and that the group of pupils who have received mediation is a reasonable reflection of the school population. At a number of schools a small group of pupils with behavioural disturbances has been excluded from mediation, because for them mediation doesn't seem to work out.

What is the attitude of pupils towards peer mediation?

In this research we've mainly interviewed peer mediators. By and large, they consider mediation to be useful, however, they state that sometimes they don't have enough to do. Coordinators occasionally indicate that peer mediators are regarded by their fellow pupils as 'friends of the system' or that mediation is 'something for sissies'. Anyway, both mediators and coordinators point out that this attitude does not occur often and that the mediator's position is usually respected. The fact that mediators are often older than the pupils who receive mediation, that in a number of cases the pupils themselves have selected them, and that they are regarded as competent, all play a part in this.

What is known about the effectiveness of the programmes and how do the parties involved assess this effectiveness?

On the basis of available high-standard research (which is scarce), Jones (2004), among other researchers, concludes that peer mediation can have positive effects. The effects concerned are an increased knowledge of conflicts, better-developed skills in dealing with conflicts, more self-reported social behaviour, better-developed negotiation skills, a positive influence on the atmosphere in the classroom and the school as a whole and a decrease of negative behaviour. Subsequently Jones states that at the elementary level

(primary schools) it has been clearly determined that peer mediators are being taught more social and emotional competences and that the atmosphere in the classroom and the school as a whole are improved. With regard to secondary education the results are less clear.

From relatively well-executed research and a meta-analysis we can deduce that positive effects are possible. However, we also find that the current state of research into this subject is not sufficient to clearly determine which specific activities or programme parts have positive effects.

All parties involved are generally pleased with peer mediation. However, they do struggle with organisational problems. The most important bottlenecks are that in some cases pupils are only rarely referred to peer mediators and that the attention for peer mediation is slackening. At certain schools these problems result in a situation in which mediation doesn't occur often. The experienced effects strongly depend on the specific situation. The effects that are mentioned include the following: quarrels are reported and resolved sooner, pupil involvement has increased, classrooms have become quieter, the training has had a positive impact on peer mediators, the workload of teachers has decreased, and pupils have learned how to better deal with conflicts. On the basis of this research it seems that peer mediation is particularly considered a success at schools with a difficult pupil population (many special needs pupils, lower levels). However, a short comment must be given with regard to this: the data concern only a limited random survey.

Jones (2004) indicates that peer mediation seems to be most effective when it is embedded in a programme in which all pupils receive education in conflict management. The small group of primary schools in our study indicate that trainings in manners and conflict management sometimes has the effect that children are already better able to prevent conflicts or to deal with them more effectively.

What can be concluded from the results of the plan and process evaluation about the possible benefit of an effect evaluation?
When we take into account the relevant literature and the experiences of the parties involved in the Netherlands, peer mediation can be an instrument to involve pupils in resolving conflicts and improving the atmosphere in school. Whether an effect evaluation is useful, will mainly depend on the questions that are taken up (content) and the set-up of the evaluation (methodology). Furthermore, the question must be asked if this evaluation must be confined to peer mediation only.