How Elementary Teachers Identify and Respond to Bullying and Forms of Relational Aggression Among Female Students

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to examine effective strategies that teachers can use to identify and respond to bullying and forms of relational aggression that takes place between female students in schools. Taking the format of a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted on two educators employed in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Key findings note that the nature, indicators, and factors that shape girl-on-girl bullying are rooted in concepts of self-esteem, relational support, and self-concept. The discussion also reveals that offering programs designed for girls and integrating anti-bullying initiatives into the curriculum are effective ways to address bullying scenarios between female students or to prevent potential relational conflicts from arising. Results also highlight the importance of character education, the teaching of empathy and self-advocacy, involving parents, and engaging teachers through professional development, some of which come with challenges. Lastly, the study concludes with recommendations as to how the Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools can better support teachers and families in the fight against relational bullying between female students.

Keywords: females, bullying prevention, anti-bullying, character education, empathy
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context and Research Problem

School aggression, also known as bullying, is a serious, common and widespread phenomenon that takes place in nearly all settings where children are grouped together (Olweus, 1993; Mitka, 2012). The literature on bullying is extensive, however, in recent years, more attention has been paid to aggression among girls by girls, as studies indicate that there has been a rise in violence perpetrated by girls (Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2007). While males tend to use physical tactics to bully – pushing, hitting, shoving – female students tend to participate in bullying in less physical but more social ways towards other female students (Dellasega & Nixon, 2007). Relational aggression manipulates peer relationships to exhibit social control and is often done passive-aggressively: spreading rumours, dispelling gossip, giving the silent treatment, excluding, or acts of betrayal (Forbes, 1998; Berman & Jiwani, 2002; Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005). Relational bullying is a less visible form of bullying (Olweus, 1993) and because of this, school staff, teachers, and parents may not always be able to recognize the signs of such aggressive behaviours exhibited by their students, which may ultimately impact how female bullies and their victims are dealt with in schools.

Research suggests that some teachers do not consider behaviours like teasing, exclusion, or name-calling to be bullying or perceive these social tactics to be less severe forms of bullying, ultimately decreasing the likelihood of teacher intervention altogether (Boulton, 1997; Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011). The inconsistencies as to what teachers and school staff consider to be bullying impacts how relationally aggressive behaviors among students are dealt. With this in mind, identifying the actions and cues associated with relationally aggressive behaviour becomes
critical for teachers to know, yet recognizing and combating relational aggression is not so simple as research suggests that many teachers feel ill-prepared with dealing with overt bullying (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Beran, 2006). A study conducted by Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener (2005) found that a majority of interviewed teachers reported that they did not receive any pre-service training on bullying and expressed a desire to receive such training. A lack of skills also prevents teachers from approaching or intervening on a bullying situation (Beran, 2006). To add to this, data collected from a study performed by Craig et al. (2011) reinforced the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers to participate in anti-violence programs in schools as well as the need to train teachers to perceive all forms of bullying as important and harmful.

Adolescent girls who are victims of bullying suffer in their academics, family life, social interactions, and overall well-being (Ambert, 1994; Goldstein & Tisak, 2003), however, research reveals that relationally aggressive youth also experience forms of distress and unhappiness about their own lives and are at a high risk of experiencing loneliness, depression, and adjustment difficulties (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). This being said, relational aggression is a significant problem because there are potentially devastating effects for both aggressors and victims.

In the province of Ontario, The Ministry of Education has implemented current policies, legislations, and initiatives that raise awareness about bullying that take place in schools in addition to addressing offences, such as the Safe Schools Act or the Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act. According to the Ministry of Education, the Schools Code of Conduct must also be present in all schools and states that students “have the right to be safe, and feel safe in their school community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000, p.1). In addition to this, each school in
Ontario has a safe schools team that works to promote safe and welcoming learning environments through planned activities and initiatives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). To heighten the awareness and consequences of bullying, the Ontario Ministry of Education established every third week in November of each school year to be Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000).

Consideration for subsection 170 (1) 7.2 of the Education Act should also be given, as the Ministry of Education states that students who have been bullied, students who have witnessed incidents of bullying, and students who have engaged in bullying should be given appropriate supports provided by school boards like that of programs, interventions, and personal supports such as social workers, psychologists, or other professionals who have training in similar fields (Education Act, 2012). However, as enforced as these policies and provincial expectations are, such programs are rather gender-neutral and do not give teachers specific strategies to deal with relational aggression among students. Moreover, because there are no gender-specific programs or strategies that address female concerns, some schools turn to gender-specific girls’ programs or community organizations to supplement or support female students who they feel may benefit from these initiatives: Ophelia’s Voice, Big Brother’s Big Sister’s Go Girls!, and GirlSpoken, to name but a few (Foisy & Steenbergen, 2006).

However, a challenge that comes with opting for such programs is that they must often be purchased and are not built into the curriculum (Foisy & Steenbergen, 2006). Foisy and Steenbergen (2006) point out that schools that use gender-specific programs from community organizations may not have money to delegate to these programs, as most programs are not free and higher-quality programs often cost more (The Ophelia Project, 2012). This leaves school districts that do not have the financial means at a disadvantage. In addition, schools and teachers
must often take the initiative to seek out and learn about these programs if they wish to integrate them into their schools (Foisy & Steenbergen, 2006).

When examining relational aggression, creating safe learning environments that specifically address issues surrounding female students and their social behaviours between one another present great challenges for schools and teachers. However, it remains important for those in the education system to recognize and understand the signs and effects of relational aggression to be better prepared in their approaches to addressing and preventing victimization that takes place among female students.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand what a sample of elementary teachers consider to be the most effective strategies and approaches that have helped them to appropriately respond to relationally aggressive behaviours exhibited by female students. By revealing the most effective strategies that schools and teachers have implemented or observed in their daily instruction, I hope to share my findings with other teachers so that cohesive, safe learning environments can be replicated by many teachers.

1.3 Research Questions

The central research question to my study is: how do a small sample of elementary teachers identify and respond to bullying and forms of relational aggression among female students? Subsidiary questions in connection to the main research question include:

- How has technology and social media changed the landscape in which students engage in bullying?
• What challenges do these teachers encounter doing this work, and how do they respond to these challenges?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

My experiences in the classroom, as both a student and as a volunteer, have directed me to this area of research. I have been the victim of social exclusion and bullying at a young age. Now that I am an adult, I want to involve myself in a way that builds on my experiences as a bullied child – I want to make meaning out of my past experiences and to create more meaning through the conducting of this research. I feel strong about bullying. I have volunteered as an in-school mentor for Big Brothers Big Sisters of York Region in the past, facilitating a girls’ program called Go Girls!, which aims to promote healthy living and positive self-esteem for young girls who are specifically chosen by school staff and teachers. Through my work and my experiences, I have come to recognize that female bullying is a reality in classrooms and in schools that many parents, teachers, and students are all too familiar with. To learn more about effective strategies and approaches that can positively combat relational aggression among female students would allow me to become a more prepared teacher and contributor to my colleagues of the larger educational community.

1.5 Overview

The research questions posed in this first chapter are answered by way of a qualitative study. Two educators were interviewed to determine the most effective strategies and approaches that aid with identifying and responding to bullying and relational aggression among female students. The second chapter reviews the literature in the areas of gendered bullying and the
consequences and effects of relational aggression and bullying. Chapter 2 also explores teacher attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of bullying and relational aggression and also examine components of popular culture and Internet use, specifically with regard to the role social media platforms have in enabling bullying behaviours among adolescent females. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology and design of the study. The specific criteria for the participants of the study will also be examined in this chapter as well as some of the limitations and strengths of the data collected from these interviews. Chapter 4 focuses on the research findings derived from the interviews with the two participants while Chapter 5 examines the findings in relation to the literature and also outlines the implications and suggested next steps for people in the field of education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The review of the literature will look at definitions of relational aggression and gendered components taken into consideration when defining relationally aggressive behavior. The literature also examines ramifications for victims of relationally aggressive behavior, highlighting some long-term effects and consequences victimized girls are often subjected to. Additionally, the literature provides insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that some teachers have on bullying and relational aggression and the level of preparedness that teachers’ feel in addressing bullying in their classrooms. From there, I will examine current provincial policies and legislation that aim to combat bullying as well community organizations that offer gender-specific girls’ programs that address anti-violence and the accessibility of these programs for schools. In addition, research on the media’s coverage and portrayal of female aggression will be reviewed as well as how the Internet and social media are mediums whereby girls bully and are bullied.

2.1 Defining Relational Aggression

Scanning the literature, there is one definition of bullying that is frequently referred to by scholars: “a person is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons” (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). According to the Ministry of Education (2015), bullying takes on many forms, but the most prominent four types of bullying are physical bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying, and cyber-bulling. This study will specifically address social bullying, also known as indirect or relational bullying. Olweus (1993) notes that the relationship between perpetrator and victim is often imbalanced in strength and power and this
disparity can be either physical or psychological. While this definition supports the general notion of bully and victim, Wiseman (2002) reinforces this definition by describing the nature of the school girl who bullies as the ‘Queen Bee’: she is “a combination of charisma, force, money, looks, will, and social intelligence, this girl reigns supreme over the other girls and weakens their friendships with others, thereby strengthening her own power and influence.” (p. 87). Similar to Olweus, Wiseman (2002) recognizes a power imbalance between those who bully and those who are more prone to being bullied, girls she refers to as ‘Targets’. “A Target is the girl who gets set up by the other girls to be humiliated, made fun of… excluded… Targets are assumed to be out of the clique, one of the class ‘losers’” (Wiseman, 2002, p. 96). Common behaviors associated with relational aggression are: gossiping, spreading rumors, social exclusion, ignoring, isolating, alienating others, threatening to withdraw emotional support or friendship, stealing friends or romantic partners (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Dellasega & Nixon, 2007; Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005; Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012). Keeping these behaviors in mind will help focus this study.

2.1.1 Gender and Bullying

It was not until the 1990’s that research began to focus on the differences in the way boys and girls showed aggression, however, despite differences in approaches, studies indicate that girls are just as aggressive as boys (Vail, 2002; Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005). Much research by Crick and Grotpeter (1995, 1996) reveals that boys tend to engage in more overt aggression which consists of behaviors that intend to harm others through physical acts: hitting, punching, shoving, or threatening to beat up a peer. Contrary to direct or overt aggression is indirect or relational aggression. Relational aggression refers to the use and manipulation of
relationships and other social tactics to cause harm to others and is often very subtle, covert, and exists on a continuum of severity (Dellasega & Nixon 2007). Researchers believe that gender plays a role in relational aggression (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Archer, 2004). Studies conducted by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reveal that girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression than boys due to the fact that girls have a tendency to focus more on relational issues with others during social interactions. The focus and energy that is often put into everyday relationships with others can be regarded as “social intelligence” (Crothers, Linpinski, & Minutolo, 2009; Wiseman, 2002).

Contrary to this position, other research suggests that relationally aggressive behaviors present at the same rate in both males and females (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Redden (2013) attributes this perceived shift in behavior to the rise in social media use. Other studies point out that the rise of female violence as portrayed in the media since the 1990’s has actually contributed to the rise in overt and aggressive actions between girl-on-girl bullying (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005). However, even though they may engage in fewer acts of physical aggression, girls engage in equal if not more incidences of social or relational aggression when compared to their male counterparts (Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005), so it can be said that young females have been perceived to exhibit more aggression and violence over the years, both physically and socially speaking. The differing understandings of how frequent and prevailing female bullying is calls to question how people, namely people in the profession of teaching and education, address the phenomenon when witnessed.

It may also be important to consider the findings of Crick, Bigbee, and Howes (1996), who contend that from the perspective of children themselves, relationally aggressive behaviours are aversive, mean, and are more common in girl-on-girl interactions. In connection to this, a
study conducted by Russell, Kraus, and Ceccherini (2010) found that girls rate relational aggression to be more hurtful than boys, which indicates that there may be a gender difference in the perception of the severity of relational aggression, which may impact the frequency and confidence to report such bullying to teachers. Although there exist some inconsistencies in the research in regards to gender and use of relational aggression and perceptions of relational aggression by students, it would be significant to observe if students’ perceptions of relationally aggressive behaviors exhibited by their peers deviates or aligns with the perceptions of teachers, and if deviations occur, why this might be the case.

2.2 Considerations and Consequences of Relational Aggression

2.2.1 On Victims of Relational Aggression

Research indicates that relational aggression holds devastating effects on both the aggressor and the target (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Adolescent girls who are victimized by other girls may reap damaging consequences that are long-lasting even after the acts of bullying have long ceased: poor academic performance, difficulties socializing, disturbances in family life, and an overall poor sense of self and well-being (Ambert, 1994; Goldstein & Tisak, 2003). The early preteen and teenage years are also critical in defining a young girl’s life as puberty, maturation, friendship, and romantic interests all fluctuate and can severely impact her personal sense of self. In addition, Ambert (1994) emphasizes that similar to how working adults who experience and bring home ‘work stress’, young female students also bring home their stresses of being relationally bullied by others. With this, it would be tremendously important to explore strategies or approaches that teachers currently employ or can employ to help parents and guardians recognize, address, and access support if their daughter is being bullied. On the other end,
research by Crick and Grotper (1995) reveal that relationally aggressive youth often experience their own personal distresses and unhappiness, especially about their peer relationships. Girls who exhibit relational aggression are also said to be at a higher risk of experiencing loneliness, depression, and adjustment difficulties (Crick & Grotper, 1995). Even though the signs may be less obvious with female aggressors, it would still be important to examine effective means that parents can use to identify if their daughter presents any indicators of being bullied or victimized.

Interestingly, Brown (2003) suggests that popular girls are often the targets of one particular mode of relational aggression – gossip. In ways, popular girls stand apart from other girls because they are desirable to boys, coveted by girls, and are liked by adults (Brown, 2003). This raises the question: what does the victim of relational aggression look like? Just as it seems that no girl is safe from being the unwilling target of relationally aggressive behavior, the description of a transgressor of relational aggression appears to be just as wide-ranging. This line of questioning contributes to the difficulties that teachers may have in identifying female students who are victims of relationally aggressive behaviours by other females.

2.2.2 On Perpetrators of Relational Aggressions

While some scholars have studied specifics and consequences that bullying may potentially have on victimized girls of relational aggression (Ambert, 1994; Goldstein & Tisak, 2003), the literature on the long-terms effects and consequences of girls who act as bullies is somewhat less extensive but is just as equally important to examine (Crick & Grotper, 1995). Students who use relational aggression frequently during their secondary and post-secondary school years are more likely to continue engaging in aggressive behaviors within other contexts of their lives, which may very much include their future workplace settings (Kreuger, Rao,
Salzer, & Saucerman, 2013; Farrington, 1993). Crothers, Lipinski, and Minutolo (2009) recognize that relational aggression to women by women is a form of violence that occurs in many businesses organizations and needs to be taken seriously by management. However, despite this concern, very little research about relationally aggressive behavior in the workplace exists (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009).

Like other forms of violence, bullying and aggressive behavior among children will escalate in frequency, severity, and consequence if such behaviors are not addressed as soon as possible (Farrington, 1993). It would be worth investigating how negative social skills in the classroom are transferred to future classroom settings and work environments if classroom teachers fail to intervene on relational aggression and bullying incidents. Such insight would inform, encourage, and push teachers to seriously address and reprimand perpetrators of classroom bullying. Teachers and people in positions of authority or power over students and young people are primary sources to prevent such aggressive behaviors from continuing on in and among society. A classroom setting is, on many levels, very similar to that of a working environment for an adult – the majority of a student’s day is spent in the confines of a classroom with other students that the child may or may not necessarily wish to work or learn with; thus, it should be a priority that teachers teach values of equity, acceptance, and collaborative skills to their students during instruction.

2.3 Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes about Bullying

The literature on teacher perceptions on bullying is significant to this study as teachers’ definitions, attitudes, and perceptions of bullying impact their responses to relational aggression and bullying in the classroom in terms of preparedness and willingness to intervene (Boulton,
1997; Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011). Review of the literature supports the claim that teachers’ responses to bullying vary due to the fact that there is a range of definitions that teachers give to bullying (Boulton, 1997; Bell, Craig, & Leschied, 2011). Some teachers perceive bullying as a minor societal concern or normative to childhood, as such incidences are needed to show children that they must stand up for themselves (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2007). Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier (2007) also suggest that teachers who hold similar perceptions are less likely to intervene in bullying scenarios in the classroom. Such positions raise the question of whether or not these teachers have ever been victims of bullying themselves. On the contrary, such positions may also raise some reversal inquiries: do these teachers perceive bullying the same way now as they did when they themselves were as children? Were these teachers ever participants in bullying behavior in the past? These potential interview questions, perhaps too personal but potentially insightful, might help to uncover why some adults are so quick to dismiss or disregard concerns raised by students who are bullied, all of which would contribute to learning about how teacher attitudes and perceptions impact professional practice and instruction.

In addition, many teachers are not aware that forms of relational aggression are even taking place in their classrooms since such bullying does not typically cause physical disruptions in the classroom environment like overt acts of aggression (The Ophelia Project, 2010). A quote that comes from a teacher-resource from The Ophelia Project’s Girls: Relational Aggression Curriculum titled, “Five Critical Steps for Reducing Peer Aggression Steps for Teachers” is:

Be aware. Sometimes the teacher’s favourite student may be the worst aggressor, especially with relational aggression. Highly aggressive girls often have high social intelligence and use their skills to please adults. It gives them power. In addition, they may be excellent
academic students. Be observant. Their aggression in class is usually covert: eye rolling, showing non-verbal disrespect, ‘just kidding’ are good clues. Note that they may be in the ‘in crowd’ (The Ophelia Project, 2010, p. 6).

To reinforce this, Brown (2003) points out that girls build a repertoire of relational experiences and learn to get their points across to each other without attracting the negative attention of adults or incurring the wrath of other girls. Taking these points and aligning them with the idea that bullying is perceived as normative to some teachers, it would be interesting to identify the extent to which such attitudes perpetuate relational aggression (i.e. are girls more inclined to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors if they sense that the classroom teacher does not take the issue seriously?).

2.4 Current Policies and Legislation that Aim to Combat Bullying in Schools

In the province of Ontario, The Ministry of Education has enforced current policies, legislations, and initiatives that address and raise awareness about bullying that take place in schools. According to the Ministry of Education, the Code of Conduct must be present in all schools and states that all students “have the right to be safe, and feel safe in their school community” (Canada. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p.2). In addition to this, each school in Ontario has a safe schools team that works to promote safe and welcoming learning environments through planned activities and initiatives that heighten awareness of bullying and the impact of the larger school community (Canada. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Safe school teams are comprised of the school principal, a teacher, a parent, a member of the broader community, and a student if appropriate (Canada. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).
To heighten awareness and understanding of bullying and the consequences of bullying, the Ontario Ministry of Education has established every third week in November of each school year to be Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week (Canada. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). Bill 157, Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act was also implemented on February 1, 2010 to reinforce Ontario’s safe schools strategy in that all school staff are required to report any serious student incidents that may negatively affect the school climate to the principal and that the parents’ of any victimized student will be notified and informed (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Consideration for subsection 170 (1) 7.2 of the Education Act should also be given here, as The Ministry of Education states that school boards are required to provide programs, interventions, and supports for students who have been bullied, students who have witnessed incidents of bullying, and students who have engaged in bullying provided by social workers, psychologists, or other professionals who are trained in similar fields, as determined by the board (Canada. Education Act, 2012).

2.5 Teacher Training to Combat Bullying

Identifying the actions and cues associated with relationally aggressive behavior becomes critical for teachers to know, yet recognizing and combating with relational aggression is not an easy task since research suggests that teachers feel ill-prepared with dealing with overt bullying (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Beran, 2006). A study conducted by Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener (2005) found that a majority of interviewed teachers reported that they did not receive any training on bullying or bullying-related issues and expressed a desire to receive such training. A lack of skills also prevents teachers from approaching or intervening in a bullying situation (Beran, 2006). To add to this, a study performed by Craig et al. (2011)
reinforced the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers to participate in anti-violence programs in schools as well as the need to train teachers to perceive all forms of bullying as important and harmful.

When examining relational aggression, creating safe learning environments that specifically address issues surrounding female students and their social behaviors present even greater challenges for schools and teachers. As mentioned earlier, teachers may be unaware that female bullying or relational aggression by females is even taking place in their classrooms since such behavior does not typically cause physical disruptions in the classroom (The Ophelia Project, 2010). It is important for those in the education system to recognize the signs of relational aggression to be better prepared for dealing with girls who use it and for those who are victims of such behaviors. Being aware of how and why girls bully other girls will help schools and teachers respond to the bullying situations that take place among their female students.

2.6 Gender-Specific Girls’ Programming in Schools and the Community

As enforced as the provincial policies and expectations are, such enterprises and policies are rather gender-neutral and do not give teachers specific strategies to deal with relational aggression among students, which, as noted earlier, remains largely undetectable. These policies also do not address gender-specific tendencies and behaviors of students. Because there are no gender-specific programs or strategies that address female concerns and realities, some schools turn to gender-specific girls’ programs or community organizations to supplement or support female students who they feel may benefit from such initiatives: The Ophelia Project, Ophelia’s Voice, Big Brother’s Big Sister’s Go Girls!, and GirlSpoken are but a few (Foisy & Steenbergen,
Most of these programs often focus on positive self-esteem, community building, and anti-violence work.

However, despite the effectiveness of such programs, the quality and quantity of regional programs are relatively inconsistent, scarce and, for the most part, deal with issues of violence in a gender-neutral manner (Jiwani, Berman, & Cameron, 2010). Another challenge with the use of these programs is that they must typically be purchased and are not built into the curriculum. Foisy and Steenbergen (2006) point out that schools that use gender-specific programs from community organizations often do not have nor do they want to delegate money to specific programs, as the better-equipped programs are more expensive (The Ophelia Project, n.d.). This also leaves schools that do not have the financial means but would benefit from such programs at a disadvantage. In addition, teachers must take the initiative to seek out and learn about these programs if they wish to integrate the teachings into their classrooms as these programs are supplementary or optional rather than mandatory (Foisy & Steenbergen, 2006).

2.7 Media and The Internet’s Influence on Adolescent Girls

2.7.1 Media Portrayal and Coverage

The portrayal of female friendships in the media often alternates between two extremes: women are either very mean and hostile towards one another or women act as if they will be best friends forever. Simmons (2015) believes that this polarity in female companionship and behaviors sends girls unrealistic messages about how to make and maintain friends in reality. The hugely popular 2004 film, Mean Girls, which has had a significant impact on popular culture, having raised more than 129 million USD in sales worldwide since its release (“Pro.BoxOffice.com”, 2015). The film encapsulates many complexities of adolescent female
friendships, depicting popular high school girls using various relational aggression tactics against one another, all of which aids in the normalization of relational aggression in media and film (Moretti et al. 2005). Simmons (2015) provides a great point in saying that the portrayal of female figures and friendships in popular culture as shown in the media may confuse and negatively influence the ways in which young girls interact with one another. As mentioned earlier, similar studies by Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (2005) indicate that the rise of overt and aggressive actions associated with female bullying reflects the rise of female violence portrayed by the media. For this study, it would be beneficial to ask teachers if they not only incorporate media into their classroom instruction but also inquire if they guide their students to critically examine such social relationships, dynamics, and cultural norms as seen in the media. That is, how do teachers include effective media literacy in their instruction? Redden (2013) believes that if students are taught to critically examine the messages relayed through the media, they will be better prepared to deal with the negative undertones that exist in the media and will be less likely to engage in relational aggression and bullying behaviours. Similarly, Moretti, Catchpole, and Odgers (2005) stress that it is important that those who support, develop, and teach curricula are recognize the role that media has on the effects on young girls and their behaviours, in order to create content that will help minimize or address the negative effects of media on students. To tie this understanding to my research, it would be wise to explore if and how teachers incorporate media and topics related to media coverage in their classrooms and teaching instruction. From this, it would be interesting to unearth if there are any instructional approaches available to reinforce positive values and aspects of friendship, self-concept, and self-esteem among female students through the lens of media or media literacy.
2.7.2 Technology and The Internet

The research presented by Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2007) considers teachers’ perceptions about normative childhood behaviors in ways that may not speak to the tech-heavy childhoods of most youth nowadays. It may be easier to stand up to a bully in person and in the flesh, however, these days, a lot of relationally aggressive behavior takes place behind a screen and online, so navigating these responses becomes increasingly difficult. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) describes cyber-bullying as the spreading of rumours and hurtful comments through the use of cellphones, e-mail, text-messaging and social networking sites. Through her extensive research, Wiseman (2009) believes that technology increases the spread and intensity of gossip, humiliation, and drama for adolescent females. She also believes adults inadvertently model poor behaviors, particularly when it comes to the use of technologies, like constant texting and the immediate expectancy of receiving texts in return. If this is the case, how do teachers and schools effectively demonstrate appropriate and acceptable behaviors when it comes to the use of technology in the classroom? This is important to bear in mind moving forward.

2.7.3 Social Media

The following is a quotation by Wiseman (2009): “Your daughter lives in two worlds simultaneously – the real world and the virtual world. In her mind, they are interconnected. What happens in one impacts the other, and vice versa” (p. 22). As with many people, many young females have an active online presence on social networking websites and platforms. The use of social media has changed the ways in which young people, namely girls, interact with other girls and boys. As Simmons (2014) reports, social networking platforms like the hugely popular Instagram, are accompanied with cryptic messages, norms, and online etiquette that may be lost
on adults but are heard loud and clear by young users, females in particular. A social networking platform like Instagram has the ability to influence and capture one’s social status and interactions with others: showcasing one’s popularity by the number of accumulated ‘followers’, ‘friends’, or ‘likes’; friendships are also put on display through online PDA (or lack of) by posting pictures or reversely, getting deleted or untagged from a photo after a fight (Simmons, 2014). This said, the use of social media networks and websites changes the way, the pace, and the intensity of potentially aggressive social behaviours by girls. With the prevalence of social media and Internet use, it would be beneficial to unravel teachers’ take on such platforms and whether they believe addressing and modeling appropriate online behavior is their responsibility or not. According to Moretti et al. (2005) finding programming or learning opportunities to engage parents in schools could decrease relational aggression. Because a large majority of Internet use by students is done outside of the classroom, it would be interesting to explore how teachers and schools teach their students to recognize the importance of their online behaviours whether home or at school, and if efforts to communicate and enforce these concerns or teachings are relayed to parents and families.

2.7.4 Consequences for Young Girls and Victims

Not only does media, technology, and the Internet provide opportunities for relational aggression to take place, but such mediums also contribute to harms and consequences that have been documented for victims of cyber-bullying. Just like victims of traditional forms of bullying, victims of cyber-bullying may become socially withdrawn, ill, depressed, or suicidal (Chibbaro, 2007; Simmons, 2014). For instance, consideration for the cases of two Canadian teenage girls should be highlighted: Rehteah Parsons from Nova Scotia and Amanda Todd from British
Columbia both committed suicide after falling victims to sexual exploitation, constant cyber-bullying and online taunts (Puxley, 2014).

The constant access to technology and the ways in which young girls exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors over the Internet has the potential to create devastating social and emotional consequences on girls in general, all of which teachers and parents need to be aware of, however, without constant supervision or monitoring, it becomes rather difficult to take heed of online behaviours that might include harassment, exclusion from group chats, forums, or image tags, or spreading of rumours and misinformation (Chibbaro, 2007).

2.8 Conclusion

In this literature review, female relational aggression is situated within the larger, prevailing context of bullying. I explored perceptions of gender differences and aggression and also examined different behaviors typically associated with male and female students. Attention was also given to the possible victims of relational aggression with mention of possible effects and consequences to such victims. This review also considers possible long-term tendencies and aggression of female bullies if early teacher intervention does not occur. Review on teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and perceptual understandings on bullying and relational aggression was also given, which raises the question of whether or not such understandings are still popular among teachers today and how these perceptions impact teachers’ responses to female bullying. Literature on the ways cyber activity and popular culture has shaped the ways young females interact and treat one another highlights the mounting need for teachers to keep up-to-date with both technology and social media platforms as well with bullying prevention and intervention
strategies that will be most effective in combating the rise of female relational aggression in schools today.

A review of the literature highlights that identifying actions and behaviors associated with relational aggression is highly important for teachers to know, yet recognizing and combating relational aggression is complicated since research suggests that teachers feel ill-prepared with dealing with bullying in general (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Beran, 2006). A lack of skills also prevents teachers from approaching or intervening on bullying situations (Beran, 2006) and not being trained to formally perceive multiple forms of bullying further fuels teachers’ lack of intervention (Craig et al., 2011). To add to this, the perceptual differences that teachers have on bullying further complicates how bullying is dealt with in classrooms and schools (Boulton, 1997; Bell, Craig, & Leschied, 2011).

The extensive literature on media, cyber-bullying, and increase in Internet activity by adolescents also creates new challenges and responsibilities for schools and teachers that some choose to take on while others do not. Thus, it becomes the aim of this study to determine which approaches and strategies elementary teachers find most effective when responding to relational aggression among their female students and whether or not specific strategies or programs are implemented into the curriculum to combat cyber-bullying trends among female students. To bridge the gap between school and home, I also want to explore strategies or approaches that teachers communicate with parents and guardians to help them recognize, address, and access support if their daughters are being bullied at school or online. Furthermore, given the evidence that suggests that girls’ programs foster positive results for participants, I want to investigate the accessibility of such programs and whether not teachers perceive these programs to be encouraging and resulting in positive relationships and self-concept among their female students.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methods that were used for my study. I begin by discussing the general approach, procedures, and the instruments of data collection. Details will be given on how participants were chosen and recruited for research. Next, I review data analysis procedures and ethical concerns that are attached to the study. Correspondingly, I discuss the methodological limitations that this research may have, but strengths of the research methods are also examined and discussed. The chapter ends with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions based on my research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research is qualitative in nature and includes a review of the literature on related topics of gender, victims and perpetrators of bullying, teacher perceptions and attitudes towards bullying, and the influence of social media and pop culture on female students and their behaviours. Data was collected by conducting two semi-structured face-to-face interviews with two Ontario elementary teachers.

As Creswell notes, the final presentation of a qualitative research study outlines complex descriptions and interpretation of the social or human problem, includes the voices of both the participants and of the researcher, and contributes to the literature or calls for a change (2007). In light of this understanding and view of qualitative research, the objective of this study is to delve into the existing body of literature on the topic at hand as well as to analyze the lived experiences of contributing participants in order to illuminate nuanced perspectives and strategies to combat female-on-female bullying in today’s classroom.
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

This study utilized informal semi-structured interviews as its primary instrument for data collection. Interviews, especially qualitative interviews, allow for understanding and meanings to be explored in depth (Arksey & Knight, 1999). When coupled with the literature review, informal semi-structured interviews provided me with a well-rounded collection of information to interpret and analyze for my research (Turner, 2010). Qualitative interviews also allow for the researcher to design an interview that attends to the research focus and questions but also enables participants to discuss experiences that are relevant, important, and familiar to them. It was critical that I asked questions that were clear, open-ended, neutral, and in sequential order to maximize my data collection from my participants (McNamara, 2009).

Some examples of interview questions that were asked are as follow:

- What resources have prepared and supported you to combat female relational aggression in your classroom and school community?
- What are some identifiers or indicators of female relational aggression?
- What are some approaches or strategies that you have found to be effective in responding to these instances of relational aggression and bullying among female students?
- In your experience, how common is it for technology and social media to play a role in relational aggression and bullying between girls?

Please refer to Appendix B for the full list of interview questions.

3.3 Participants

In this section, a review of the established criteria for participant recruitment is given, alongside how candidates were selected and who the research participants are.
### 3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The following criteria was used to select the appropriate participants for my study:

- Participants will be educators in the elementary panel with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience and be currently working as an educator (teacher or administrator).
- Participants have witnessed bullying, specifically female-on-female bullying, in their classroom or school community.
- Participants have demonstrated commitment, leadership, and/or expertise in the area of anti-bullying education and more specifically, relational bullying between girls.

For the purposes of this study, the criterion of experience was critical. I believe that in order for a candidate to comment or speak on bullying, he or she must have witnessed or become involved in the bullying scenario, and this comes with time in the field. Because my study focused on female relational aggression, I sought participants who have specifically witnessed and addressed female bullying. Moreover, I wanted to interview participants who demonstrated inclusive practices in his or her classroom or school, whether that involved having taken part in anti-bullying initiatives or campaigns, engaging in professional development courses or workshops, or shedding light on inclusive teaching strategies. Participants were also expected to have demonstrated competence and confidence in addressing bullying among his or her students in the past.

### 3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

Since established criteria was set for participants, this study involved purposive sampling. I relied on convenience sampling for this study, as I found myself surrounded by a community of
teacher colleagues and mentor teachers. Convenience sampling has both strengths and limitations. One strength of convenience sampling is that it enables me to collect participants who are easy to find and access (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Weathington, Cunningham, & Pittenger, 2010). Conversely, convenience sampling may potentially bias the results and subsequent interpretation of the data as the sample does not represent the larger population (Weathington, Cunningham, & Pittenger, 2010).

The recruiting process was a rather long one, as many teachers and administrators were unresponsive or unable to participate in the research study due to the work action by members of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario at the time. I began my recruiting process by contacting school principals. These principals were from schools where I completed prior teaching placements, schools that I have volunteered at, and schools that I have attended as a former student. Emails were sent out that provided an overview of my study as well a consent letter; I asked the principals to distribute my information to candidates in their schools that they believed were suitable and/or were interested. A teacher from one of my practicum schools replied – he met my established criteria and so a meeting was set up. I also advertised my research study by word of mouth to friends, family, and colleagues. The second participant who was selected is a principal. This participant was found through a personal friend who works as a social worker at the school where the principal is employed.

3.3.3 Participants Biographies

Two experienced educators were interviewed for this study. The first participant interviewed was John. John has been a teacher for 23 years and is currently teaching Grade 5 at a school in which he has been with for the past 11 years. Jane was the second research participant
to be interviewed. Jane has been an educator for 24 years: she was teaching at an outdoor education center for 5 years, was a consultant for 3 years, was a vice-principal for 6 years, and is currently a principal and has been for the past 5 years.

3.4 Data Analysis

The process of analyzing the data collected for this research study began with a review of the literature. A review of the literature on related topics on bullying prevention and intervention strategies allowed me to better identify and categorize themes from the data that subsequently derived from the interviews. After collecting the data by conducting the interviews, I transcribed the interviews into script format. I then read through the transcripts of each interview and identified codes within the data as well as themes within the categories. After I determined the codes and the categories, I deduced several themes and subthemes from the data, which were then presented as findings in Chapter 4.

Bearing all this in mind, it was extremely important for me to continuously write as I carried on in my research. As Bazeley (2009) notes, the reflective writing process that I engaged myself serve to be important sources of interpretive understanding as concepts are dissected and ideas are explored from the collected data. Finally, I linked my interpretations to the larger body of literature developed by others previously reviewed to finalize my engagement in this reflective writing process (Creswell, 2007).

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

This study followed the ethical review procedures as outlined for the Master of Teaching program. Prior to interviewing, a discussion of the overall research study took place with
participants to ensure that the purpose of the study was clear. A letter of consent was also emailed to each participant prior to the interview, which provided participants with an overview of the study, details of the interview process, ethical implications, and expectations of participation, all of which are discussed in this section. Participants were asked to sign a consent letter (see Appendix A) which gave their consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded.

In order to effectively minimize the potential power imbalance that may take place during the interview process (Creswell, 2007), I, as the researcher, took great efforts to ensure that all participants felt respected and by upholding the ethical procedures as expected by the program. Participants had the opportunity to ask any questions that they had prior to being interviewed. Participants were also informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that withdrawing was an option that could be taken at any given time. Participants also had the option to refrain from answering any questions if they felt inclined. The identities of both of the research participants will remain confidential for this study and pseudonyms have been assigned for both participants. Once the 45-60 interview was completed and the collected data was transcribed, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts to clarify, retract, and/or approve their statements. No data was analyzed or published until the transcripts were deemed valid by the participants. All data collected will continue to be stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed after a maximum of five years. Participants were also informed that only my course instructor and I will have access to the collected data.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Given the research approach and certain parameters of the Master of Teaching Research Project, there were some limitations to this study. Since the data for this study derived from only
2 educators, the sample size was small and may not accurately represent the larger population of teachers and administrators and their experiences with female relational aggression and relevant anti-bullying strategies. Relatedly, because the parameters of the MTRP allowed only for educators to be interviewed, the experiences, voices, and insight of parents and students were unavailable and unheard. Since this research study focused on female bullies and victims of female bullying, the perspectives of students and parents would have given this study greater depth and dimension.

In terms of methodological strengths, there were some items to consider. The idea of reciprocity and offering some sort of gain to my participants for their time and efforts in this study was one (Creswell, 2007). Through the process of interviews, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices and thus, make meaning from their lived experiences. The qualitative interview process enabled the participants to voice their opinions about the topic at hand, which allowed for an in-depth and personal understanding that these specific educators have had. The aim of the study was to illuminate the most effective strategies to combat female bullying and so the practices and experienced realities shared by the participants contributed greatly to the overall objective of the study.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter discusses the key methodological decisions used in this study. Given that the research approach was qualitative in nature, a review of the literature coupled with semi-structured interviews with educators enhanced my understanding of the topic at hand and allowed me to conceptualize the theories and ideas I had previously reviewed. I discussed the criteria that participants must have met in order to taken part in the study: minimum five years
teaching experience, having witnessed female bullying among students, having confidence and competence in addressing bullying, and the active exercising of inclusive teaching practices. Once the interviews had taken place, I transcribe the data into script format and from there, I identified codes, categories, and themes within the data. Finally, chapter 3 ends by examining the methodological limitations and strengths that of this study. Next, any consistencies and findings derived from the data will be presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report and discuss the findings collected from face-to-face interviews with two participants, Jane and John, both of whom have worked in the education profession for more than two decades. The aim of this study was to examine how elementary teachers identify and respond to bullying and forms of relational aggression among female students. The data collected during these interviews have been analyzed and organized into the following three main themes: 1) Understanding the Nature, Indicators, and Factors that Shape Girl-on-Girl Bullying; 2) Combatting Female Bullying: Integrating Anti-Bullying Education and Bullying Prevention into the Curriculum, Programming Designed for Female Students, Balancing Support with Self-Advocacy, Teaching Empathy and Character Education; and 3) Responding to Bullying by Educating Parents and Educating Teachers Through Ongoing Professional Development. An analysis of these themes and applicable subsidiary themes will be discussed here.

4.1 Understanding the Nature, Indicators, and Factors that Shape Girl-on-Girl Bullying

When assessed and compared to male bullying, there are many notable differences that exist within the realm of female-on-female bullying. A teacher’s understanding and experiences of relational aggression among females will ultimately impact his or her preparedness and responses in intervening and dealing with such bullying scenarios. Both research participants interviewed for this study indicated that they are aware of the differing characteristics between how and why male students bully and how and why female students bully. Given the
complexities of female bullying, several sub-themes were identified within this larger overarching theme.

4.1.1 Recognizing That Bullying Is About Power

Before analyzing the particularities of relational aggression between girls as disclosed by the participants, consideration for one crucial element should be given. Many scholars of bullying agree that regardless of the manner or form, one commonality that connects all cases of bullying is power. This said, understanding particular power dynamics involved in bullying and aggressive behaviour is important for teachers to consider for their own teaching and handling of conflict, but such understanding is also key for the analysis of participants’ responses in this present study. When he observes a group of female students, John often asks himself “who is the leader of this cluster of girls?” This question suggests that there is often one girl who wields the most influence among her friends. This aligns with the notion of a “Queen Bee’, the girl that reigns supreme over the other girls…” (Wiseman, 2002, p. 87). Jane offered a similar statement about power imbalances between girls who bully and girls who are bullied: “As far as the bully… they become… bolder, I think it becomes more evident and more frequent when it’s not being addressed because they’ve got power. They feel powerful.” The research participants recognize that in any given school setting, relationships exist among students and within social circles, and agree that there is typically one girl who holds the most influence and power amongst her friends. Recognizing who this girl may be or being able to identify any power struggles or changes between female friends will help address or prevent potential scenarios that involve bullies, victims, and/or bystanders.
4.1.2 Recognizing The Many Possible Indicators of Relational Aggression Between Girls

In bullying scenarios, imbalances in strength and power can either be physical or psychological, but as the literature suggests, females tend to focus more on the relational and social dynamics that exist between themselves and others (Olweus, 1993; Wiseman, 2002). With this in mind, indications of power struggles and relational conflict might be difficult for teachers or adults to notice at the outset. When asked to describe some indicators of relational aggression, John recalled a situation that took place one year that involved a small group of female students in a Grade 3/4 combined class: girls who were often physically close and always played together kept at a distance from one another throughout the school day. John explained, “with girls, it’s spatial – no tears necessarily, but physical distance.” With this, he investigated the situation and uncovered that one girl felt excluded when her friend began playing with another female student in the class. When a female student does not feel ‘included’ in her typical social circle or posse, feelings of isolation and distress may begin to emerge. This particular observation described by John aligns with what many scholars have said about the meaning and implications of being a part of a social circle and the significance of physical proximity between girls (Wiseman, 2002; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Dellasega & Nixon, 2007; Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005; Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012).

When asked to describe some indicators of relational aggression, Jane said that she observes the following signs from victims: “Sadness. Withdrawal. Absenteeism. Retaliation. Escalation... because they’ve just had it”. Jane continued to describe other behaviours that might indicate that a girl is being bullied at school: her parents coming in, a downturn in work, an inability to stay focused, dropping out of activities or clubs, and a cease in academic risk-taking for fear of being mocked or having attention drawn to herself. In connection with the literature,
these behaviours are tell-tale signs of distress from students who may be relationally victimized by peers (Ambert, 1994; Goldstein & Tisak, 2003), however, as John and Jane both alluded, these signs become more observable over time if they persist. Thus, this should encourage teachers to get to know all of their students well in order to be able to recognize significant changes in their behaviours if and when they do occur.

4.1.3 Recognizing the Factors That Promote Bullying

There are numerous factors that may potentially contribute to a girl’s motivation to bully another girl. Jane discussed the notion that there are stereotypes that focus on physical appearance and personal image that are more often associated with girls than with boys, which she believes is profoundly detrimental to females and their self-esteem on the whole. Jane also acknowledged that insecurities exist in adult women as well, and believes that teacher responses to certain conflicts involving female students may be inhibited by such self-doubts “…it’s hard for an adult woman, who herself feels very conscious of herself, that you know, has to be a certain way, and when put in a really uncomfortable situation, will either flee or fight…. “ This suggests that regardless of where or whom it may be rooted in, whether it be a student aggressor or a supervising adult, having low self-esteem may foster opportunities for bullying and for the tolerance of such behaviour. Generally speaking, it is known that bullies have low self-esteem, but this comment about teacher self-esteem is highly imperative, especially to this particular study, as it raises alternative considerations to understanding how relationally aggressive behaviour by females unfolds: teachers who have personal insecurities or self-doubt may be hesitant or may even fail to intervene when bullying takes place in his or her own classroom. If this is the case, students may regard this lack of action by the teacher as the teacher being
tolerant and/or accepting of bullying behaviours. Additionally, as mentioned previously, Jane believes that bullying behaviour becomes much bolder and more frequent if it is not addressed.

Both John and Jane point out that bullying also stems from a deficiency or lack of some sort. John believes that in many instances with girls, relationally aggressive behaviours or perceptions of relational aggression occurs when a student lacks understanding or is unable to accept when a friend of theirs interacts or behaves outside of routine or familiarity: “with girls, it’s often about friendship and building allegiances with friends… if I have allegiance with one, then I can’t be aligned with another.” Being unable to fully interpret scenarios or the inability to articulate feelings in these conflictual situations may further propel sentiments of jealousy and insecurity among girls, supporting the research that children are still in the process of developing their social and emotional intelligences. Behaviours that stem from feelings of possessiveness demonstrate that there is a lack of emotional or social understanding and empathy. On the other hand, Jane pointed out that a child who bullies often lacks a relationship somewhere in his or her life. Since girls have a tendency to focus more on social and relational issues, lack of friendships or companionships may negatively impact a young girl’s self-esteem and social and emotional developments in a school setting.

Jane and John also touched on the fact that compassion or empathy is often missing when bullying takes place, which returns to the idea that social and emotional intelligence are still in the process of development for many young people. This concept of empathy will be discussed at greater length later on in this chapter. Given these remarks, it appears that both participants also understand that relational conflicts between girls and related behaviours are often taken very personally by girls, which may ultimately impinge on her self-esteem and personal sense of self,
which may have consequences within and outside of the classroom for various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, parents, siblings, and or other students).

In addition, both participants expressed perceptions that females to have a tendency and are more likely to hold on to hurt feelings compared to male students. John said that girls are “reluctant to let go”, whether that be of friends or of experiences; comparatively, Jane shared the following: “boys get it out of their system! They are angry, they let go and then they move on. They don’t hold grudges. Girls hold grudges. They do.”

Another factor Jane believes might encourage bullying situations is that students may take on behaviours or coping mechanisms – healthy or not – as observed or accepted by parents or guardians at home. She says that parents may have been bullies or have been bullied themselves in the past, so what might be acceptable at home may potentially be carried over into the school environment, which emphasizes the idea that children do as they are taught or as they know. This is important to keep in mind moving forward with the analysis of bullying intervention and prevention strategies that are used by the research participants.

4.2 Combatting Female Bullying: Integrating Anti-Bullying Education and Bullying Prevention into the Curriculum, Programming Designed for Female Students, Balancing Support with Self-Advocacy, and Teaching Empathy and Character Education

Since many motivations behind female bullying and incidents stem from low self-esteem and underdeveloped social and emotional intelligence, both participants emphasized the importance of implementing activities, strategies, and programs into their everyday curriculum that focus on teaching social or emotional development, engaging in open-dialogue, and building self-esteem. The specific strategies that Jane and John have used or have been a part of in their
own classroom or schools will be discussed in subthemes. Moreover, it should be noted that while some of the following are specific strategies and programs designed for female-student engagement, many of these strategies and approaches can very well be implemented and beneficial for all students.

4.2.1 Integrating Anti-Bullying Education and Bullying Prevention into the Curriculum

Jane and John both strongly believe that bullying prevention and anti-bullying education can be infused in all grades and in all areas of the Ontario curriculum; this said, the participants both described instances throughout their careers where they have incorporated opportunities for social-emotional learning and development in their teaching and instruction. Both participants see language arts as a subject area that provides a myriad of opportunities to teach kids about social and emotional intelligence and development, anti-bullying, or inclusion – choices in reading materials, personal reflections, letter-writing to a bully, or poetry study are but a few ways. From this, John facilitated dramatic role-play and skits by having students act out the parts of bullies, the bullied, bystanders, and adults. Jane regards media literacy as an effective strand in language arts to invite students to be critical examiners of various elements in the media; Jane spoke about examining various elements in the media that might be perceived as or promote bullying as ideas for lessons and discussions.

Furthermore, Jane and John both described ways teaching about bullying and bullying-related issues can be done through the discipline of science. John said he has had students study the physiology of the human body when one is bullied for a science task; Jane has taken courses offered by her school board about the neurology of bullying and how
one’s brain is wired differently in different contexts and situations, information that she considers to be extremely interesting and valuable to share with others. Both participants also agree that it takes much time, consideration, thoughtful planning, and creativity to infuse anti-bullying education into the everyday curriculum.

4.2.2 Programming Designed for Girls in School

In keeping with the integrity and standards of practice of the profession, all teachers and schools have the obligation to provide safe learning environments for all students, so given the complexities associated with females and relational and emotional matters, there are times when schools and teachers have implemented programs or clubs designed specifically for female students. Through her positions as both educator and as administrator, Jane has arranged and employed several successful programs and clubs that that work specifically with female students that focus on relational or socio-emotional issues. While working as an outdoor educator for several years, Jane would facilitate a group of high school girls that focused on collaboration, leadership, and esteem-building. The girls would come together to create crafts, bake, and take part in outdoor learning. In addition to this, she took a more direct and proactive approach one year and had a school social worker come into the school to work directly with a group of girls to deter bullying behaviours and practices. Of the program, Jane said: “it was about, what does it mean to be a friend? What do friends do? What do friends not do? Self-esteem... How do you like yourself? ”

With the exception of some extra-curricular programs, which she said are always open to all students in the school, Jane has employed gender-specific female programs at a few of her schools in her administrative position, which have been based on a referral process by teachers or
administrators. An example of a community in-school mentoring programs which she has found to be successful with students is offered by Big Brothers Big Sisters to work with girls on an individual or small group basis. Jane stressed the importance of recognizing and referring students who exhibit pre-dispositions to bullying behaviours to these in-school initiatives. She said, “if we intervene and see how she's feeling and what she's thinking, I think it could become more positive.” This is crucial for teachers to note as the literature often emphasizes that the indicators of female bullying are often very covert and indirect, which makes it difficult for teachers to catch, thus, it becomes integral that teachers take the time to be observant of their students and to also engage in conversation in order to get to know each of their girls personally.

When asked if he has ever taken part or is familiar with any initiatives targeting female students, John described a program called S.W.A.G., *Strength Within All Girls*. The initiative has run for a few years at his current school – the group’s genesis was based on the need to address several reports of culturally-specific bullying incidents between intermediate girls. That year, a survey was conducted on all parents and students that asked the community about concerns and issues that were perceived to be happening at the school; as a result, S.W.A.G. was generated. The group was designed by staff members to have girls get together on a weekly basis, to talk about issues, and to generate positive action-plans for the school and for themselves. John says that the group was very well-received and had a positive impact on certain girls who staff members felt needed the support the most.

Through their experiences, it appears that these initiatives as described by Jane and John are designed, conceived, or obtained by schools or teachers as needed within each school community. Research by Foisy and Steenbergen (2006) suggests that this is often the case for many schools, as most school boards generally do not offer many, or any, gender-specific
programming, clubs, or resources needed for issues concerning young girls or young adolescent females.

4.2.3 **Balancing Support with Self-Advocacy**

Another point of agreement that Jane and John both shared is recognizing the value and the importance of providing students with support and guidance in dealing with bullying but at the same time, also encouraging students to advocate for themselves. John cautioned against “getting too involved… because we want these kids to grow up with self-advocacy and the ability to solve problems on their own.” John also believes that it is very easy for everyone to “tell a teacher”, what he thinks has become a stock answer, one that is too simple. Jane voiced a similar train of thought. When addressing a female student who a teacher believes may be a potential victim of bullying, she thinks it is important to have lots of one-on-one private discussions with the student and through these conversations, the teacher should be letting the student know that it is up to the student to inform a staff member if adult involvement is needed.

4.2.4 **Teaching Empathy and Character Education**

It is generally known that those who bully often lack empathy or have yet to develop social-emotional intelligence to be empathetic, thus driving him or her to be aggressive and unkind without regard or feeling as to what their victim might be experiencing. This said, Jane and John both highlight the importance of character education and deem that teaching empathy is necessary and crucial for student learning. When prompted with the question of whether or not it is a teacher’s responsibility to address behaviours that take place outside of the classroom, John said, the following:
Unlike those curriculum expectations we have at the end of the day, we also want them to have good character along with good academic skills and I think it is incumbent of us to teach them about making good choices outside of class (John, personal communication, October 5, 2015).

Jane offered a similar statement: “…character education should also be a part of everything you do… character education deals with anti-bullying.” These comments might help answer the subsidiary research question that asks why participants feel justified in their responses to female relational aggression. The approaches and strategies given by both Jane and John help students engage with others and with themselves in ways that encourage social and emotional learning and development.

However, the analysis of participant responses also offers the need to underscore the importance of developing social intelligence and emotional intelligence for all individuals – both children and adults alike. As expressed earlier, Jane believes that the implications associated with female stereotypes that have to do with expectations of physical and personal image hold the power to impact females of any age. She said: “it has to do with how you feel about yourself. And so even if you’re a teacher or a student and you’re not feeling successful, your self-esteem is going to be… in jeopardy… and… you become much more vulnerable….” Jane elaborated on this idea of vulnerability: “we are constant role models, and when vulnerable kids see adults seeing vulnerable, then that's a really good thing.” Behind this, what is significant about this comment is the notion that teachers are constant role models; so even if faced with vulnerable or low circumstances, teachers should conduct themselves in manners that students can positively look up to and model themselves after. Female students might be more impressionable of what their female teachers do or say in the classroom, so modeling positive, encouraging, and
appropriate behaviour is critical. This aligns with what Wiseman (2002) says about the inadvertent tendency that adults have in modeling poor behaviours that can be easily picked up by children.

Jane made it clear that she recognizes that we are all human with flaws and insecurities, and so with this, she always does her best to demonstrate empathy, patience, and understanding towards her own staff members to encourage all of them to do the same towards their own students, especially towards children and young girls, she stressed. Teachers should have some level of confidence and comfort with him or herself before being able to successfully provide the proper instruction, communication, and care for their students. Jane explained that as a principal, it is critical that she take the time to get to know her own staff and try to understand them the best that she can, so that she can be empathetic towards her team. As a person in a position of power and authority in her school community, Jane believes that if she shows empathy to the staff in her school, then the are more likely to demonstrate empathy to their own students. This simple and honest approach shared by Jane is one that would truly benefit all members of any school community, males and females, staff and students alike.

John, on the other hand, shed light on an approach that he often uses to try to get students to become more understanding and empathetic to their peers when a bullying situation is brought to attention. John is adamant about providing students many opportunities for conversation and oral communication, which he said is very important for both academic and character education. When bullying incidences occur in his classroom, in the past, John has had meetings with all of the students involved: everyone, including himself, sits in a circle formation and one at a time, each person shares his or her point of view and feelings to get to the root of the issue. John emphasized that it is important that
students hear from each other, which he finds is most helpful in having the students see the bigger picture of the situation for him or herself. John mediates the situation and encourages the students to pose strategies and solutions to the situation, further reinforcing previous comments made by both participants about the need for students to have self-advocacy in conflictual situations with peers.

4.3 Responding to Bullying by Educating Parents and Educating Teachers Through Ongoing Professional Development

Many teachers recognize that combatting bullying is a multi-layered initiative that requires much effort, time, and involvement from many people. In addition to the aforementioned approaches and strategies shared by Jane and John – integration into the curriculum, programming for female students, balancing support with self-advocacy, and empathy and character education – the research participants explained that combatting bullying also requires involvement from parents and guardians of the community as well as ongoing professional development of teachers. Specifically, this section examines the need to involve and educate parents about cyber-bullying and social media as well as assessing professional development initiatives for teachers.

4.3.1 Challenges of Addressing Cyber-bullying: Generation Gap and Cultural Perceptions

An effective way to help combat and minimize bullying scenarios between female students in schools is to enforce anti-bullying initiatives and prevention programs through parental involvement and education. Since many children and adolescents spend a lot of their time online at home, informing parents of the dangers of cyber-bullying, Internet safety, and
promoting digital citizenship greatly helps teachers and schools combat bullying and aggressive online behaviours. However, regarding technology and social media, some concerns were raised by both Jane and John. Both participants expressed during their respective interviews that due to differences in age, needs, and personal preferences, adults like themselves, may not necessarily be active on, familiar with, or interested in the same technology or social media networks that students may be using. John hypothesized that Facebook is more popular amongst older folk and than it is for youth, while Jane admitted that she does not know of all of the forums students are active on these days.

Despite the gaps between generations and social media use, both Jane and John are very much aware of the need and the importance of educating parents and other adults of Internet safety and cyber-bullying, in order to help teach students to be responsible while online. As John pointed out, youth today are born into technology so such technology is not going to be leaving their lifestyle anytime soon, if ever, which furthers the need to close the generational gap between social media use and online activity. Recognizing these gaps and the challenges that come with them, Jane has held workshops for parents at her school that focus on Internet use and online safety in the past. Yet attached to such efforts to address the every-changing ways of technology and social media is the need to be culturally responsive and sensitive to students, families, and their home lives. She said that in her experiences, communicating information related to cyber-bullying and online dangers to parents has proved challenging at times since differences in perception about tones of voices, gestures, language, and social cues and norms between cultures may impact how bullying is ultimately perceived and addressed.
4.3.2 How Ongoing Professional Developments Potentially Minimize Interest Among Teachers Due to Perceived Redundancy

Jane and John both share the belief that engaging in ongoing professional development to absorb various approaches and strategies to combat bullying is critical; taking part in anti-bullying initiatives, intervention and prevention programs have greatly informed their personal understanding and abilities to address bullying incidences that takes place in their own classrooms: annual partnerships with local police, online resources, professional development workshops, attending guest speakers, reading materials provided by the school board, or personal research and experiences of teachers. The participants believe that most of these professional development initiatives available for staff are often gender-neutral and are meant to address all students in general. Ongoing professional development, whether board-directed, school-directed, or self-directed, is integral for all teachers to improve their teaching practices, which serve to benefit all students in the long run, however, from the comments shared by the participants, it appears that the redundant or trite nature of these very initiatives may cause disinterest or disengagement among staff, potentially minimizing the objective or meaning of such enterprises.

As an administrator, Jane has experienced some resistance from staff in the past: “sometimes getting staff on board because it sounds like the same, ‘here we go again’... we're doing the same stuff on bullying.” However, as the research reminds us and through experiences encountered in our day-to-day lives, uses of technology and social media networks are always fluctuating; the constant and rapid changes that come with certain technologies and popular social media platforms impacts the landscape of bullying and aggressive online behaviours, so it would be in the best interest of teachers to keep up-to-date with what students are active on or familiar with. As Simmons (2014), points out, young females have a tendency to be more attracted and more
active on certain social media platforms like that of Instagram, and so keeping up with a girl’s online activity may be more difficult to do for some adults if the familiarity or interest is not there.

In keeping with the notion that anti-bullying initiatives are common albeit some concerns regarding meaning and effectiveness, John believes that anti-bullying initiatives create answers that might be too simple or overused like that of “tell a teacher”, which he perceives to now have become a “stock response” that teachers tell to students. As mentioned previously, John believes that it is the responsibility of teachers to guide students to grow up with strong problem-solving skills and a sense of self-advocacy, and so repeatedly telling students to approach an adult for even the smallest of concerns might minimize this target.

4.4 Conclusion

An in-depth analysis of the interviews given by the Jane and John raised several significant findings. A deeper understanding of female tendencies, characteristics, and behaviours was reached, most of which supports the literature and helps to provide a better sense of indicators of motivating factors behind relational aggression by female students. The emphases on friendship, self-esteem, and vulnerability were very interesting to unearth and tremendously important to discuss in the final chapter of this study, particularly adult vulnerability in relation to collegial support and to student behaviour. Participants also shared various strategies that they have found to be effective in responses to female bullying: curriculum integration, the implementation of girl groups and/or clubs within their schools, encouraging self-advocacy, and the teaching of empathy and character education. Educating parents and families and engaging in professional development were also discussed, albeit
some limitations and challenges which will be elaborated on in the concluding chapter. The main themes and subsidiary themes identified from this chapter’s findings will be finalized and amalgamated with implications, recommendations, and final conclusions pertaining to this research project. Proposals for further study will also be suggested.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The main research question guiding this study is: how do a small sample of elementary teachers identify and respond to bullying and forms of relational aggression among female students? To answer this research question, data was gathered through two face-to-face interviews to highlight effective approaches and strategies that educators can use to address school bullying that takes place between female students. This final chapter summarizes the research findings, discusses the study’s implications, and provides recommendations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Following two interviews with two educators, three themes emerged from the collected data after thorough analysis: 1) understanding the nature, indicators, and factors that shape girl-on-girl bullying; 2) implementing effective strategies to combat female bullying; and 3) responding to bullying by educating parents and educating teachers through ongoing professional development.

5.1.1 Understanding the Nature, Indicators, and Factors That Shape Girl-on-Girl Bullying

This first theme, understanding the nature, indicators, and factors that shape girl-on-girl bullying, serves to remind us that although there exists overlapping characteristics between how and why males bully and how and why females bully, there are specific and unique factors that shape female-on-female bullying in schools and classrooms. The research findings pointed to female students as having tendencies to be physically tightknit with one another, so having some sense of spatial awareness helps with identifying if and when friendships are tense or have
altered between girls. Furthermore, when it comes to females, certain power dynamics can develop and exist between friends that constitute what are called “Queen Bees” or leaders within a female group (Wiseman, 2002, p. 87). Shifting allegiances, or the inability to fully accept, understand, or empathize relational scenarios also contribute to building tensions among females.

It is also important to understand that stereotypes often associated with females that have to do with physical appearances, self-consciousness, and self-esteem greatly contribute to how bullying incidences unfold and develop in classrooms. It is known that bullies bully due to their own personal problems and low self-esteem. How a female teacher’s own experiences of insecurity or self-consciousness might shape her responses to bullying taking place between her students was a key question raised in the findings of this study. One participant presented the notion that if a female teacher does, in fact, experience personal moments of insecurity or self-consciousness in the classroom herself, then these behaviours may ultimately impact if and how she responds to bullying incidences that take place between her own students. All of this being said, recognizing and understanding various factors that contribute to girl-on-girl bullying is crucial for identifying and responding to these incidences when they do occur in schools.

5.1.2 Combatting Female Bullying: Integrating Anti-Bullying Education and Bullying Prevention into the Curriculum, Programming Designed for Female Students, Balancing Support with Self-Advocacy, and Teaching Empathy and Character Education

The second theme uncovered during analysis explores effective strategies that educators identified to have been successful in combatting or preventing female bullying. Four main strategies were shared: 1) integration of anti-bullying education into the curriculum; 2) programming designed for girls in schools and in the community; 3) balancing support and self-
advocacy; and 4) the importance of teaching empathy and character education – for students and
for staff.

First, opportunities to incorporate anti-bullying education and inclusive practices exist in
nearly all areas of the curriculum, throughout each school day, all year round. Teachers can
infuse anti-bullying education and bullying prevention throughout various disciplines, such as
the language arts, the arts or sciences. The objective behind integrating inclusive practices into
multiple subject areas or facilitating anti-bullying initiatives throughout the school year is to
teach students to be compassionate, respectful, and supportive individuals who are able to
communicate and listen effectively with others. The second strategy, programming designed for
girls may also be implemented in schools, however, these programs may need to be designed,
created and run by staff as needed. It may also be beneficial to generate open programs or clubs
targeted to all female students that focus on building positive self-esteem and positive
relationships; implementing programs based on teacher or administrative referrals to work with
specific girls who might benefit from the help was also said to be constructive as well. The third
strategy to bear in mind is that although it is imperative that teachers provide support and
guidance to students who find themselves in bullying situations, it is also very crucial that
teachers provide students with the tools and support to be advocates for themselves in difficult
situations involving their peers. Lastly, teaching empathy and character education is vital for and
benefits all students and teachers alike; when teachers model humility, vulnerability, and the
ability to listen and communicate respectfully and effectively, students will be more encouraged
to emulate such behaviours as well. When all members of a school community contribute to
creating a safe learning community and demonstrate a collective intolerance for bullying, then
these shared actions will help to aid in the intervention and prevention of bullying situations in schools altogether.

5.1.3 Responding to Bullying by Educating Parents and Educating Teachers Through Ongoing Professional Development

The last theme to emerge from the findings was responding to bullying by educating parents and educating teachers through ongoing professional development. This theme is significant as it discusses the importance and the need to continually educate parents, families, and teachers about bullying and bullying-related issues in order to effectively combat female bullying scenarios in schools. First, there are clear benefits to engaging parents in anti-bullying initiatives and creating opportunities for parents and families to learn more about bullying, specifically the potential dangers that come with Internet use and cyber-bullying. Since technology and popularity of various social media platforms are changing often and rapidly, the need to reach out and to educate parents on their children’s online safety and the dangers of cyber-bullying is important and often very necessary. This education is needed as it enables and encourages parents and families to teach and inform their children about safe Internet use and appropriate digital citizenship; involving families in the fight against bullying also sends a clear message to the whole community that bullying is not tolerated and is unacceptable, at home or at school.

Similarly, teachers should also strive to take part in ongoing professional development to better inform themselves of practices and strategies to effectively combat bullying. As the literature emphasizes, the landscape of bullying is constantly changing, particularly with the rise and popularity of Internet use and social media, and so staying informed about current trends and
information that pertains to anti-bullying work, intervention, or prevention, will only better equip educators.

5.2 Implications

This section will discuss the broad implications of this study for the educational research community and the narrow implications of my professional identity and practice as a teacher.

5.2.1 Broad Implications: The Educational Research Community

The present study has three important implications for various stakeholders in the educational community – schools, school boards, parents, teachers, and students. First, in broad strokes, this study should serve as a reminder to everyone that relational aggression and social bullying between female students does in fact take place and with significant ramifications. Findings from this study underline that a great deal of relational or aggressive behaviour exhibited by female students are not always observable to teachers. As described by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Archer (2004), girls have a tendency to focus more on relational issues during social interactions when compared to boys, so bullying behaviours tend to be subtler and more covert. This said, it becomes all the more important that teachers are cognizant of female students’ social and emotional well-being and behaviours – doing so would be beneficial for teachers, students, and the classroom atmosphere on the whole.

On this note, while there is a need to teach empathy and emotional intelligence throughout the curriculum, teachers should also be providing students with tools and resources to be personal advocates for themselves when faced with difficult social situations with peers.
These teachings should center on respect, communication, and empathy. These same teachings are also essential for staff members to absorb as well; creating a work climate where colleagues are empathetic, kind, and emotionally available to support one another would cultivate the happiness and well-being of all school personnel. If this climate is created, then teachers may be more likely to address relational bullying scenarios among their students more astutely, effectively, and with empathy and compassion.

Third, school boards and schools should be cognizant of how educational workshops for parents and families and professional development workshops for teachers are designed and led. Given the ever-changing technology and increasing popularity of social media networks, it is important to involve and to educate parents about the potential dangers that come with online activity, however, relaying and teaching such information should be conducted in ways that are culturally responsive, culturally sensitive, and mindful of differences that may exist between cultures and generations; differences in cultural and generational perceptions may impact how behaviours are identified, perceived, or understood to be bullying. For instance, compared to native speakers of English who grew up in Canada or have resided here for many years, newcomers to Canada whose first language is not English may have difficulty distinguishing between playful acts of teasing versus intended acts of intimidation used by school children; sarcasm may be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or downplayed.

School boards and schools should also consider if the frequent or repetitive nature and presentation of anti-bullying initiatives and programs may possibly hinder interest and/or engagement from in-service teachers who have encountered such enterprises many times before. These broad implications serve as a solid reminder that there is a pressing need to continue the
conversation about female-on-female bullying in schools all the while developing effective responses.

5.2.2 Narrow Implications: My Professional Identity and Practice

The results of the research findings have unearthed some personal implications for me as a researcher and as a teacher. As a researcher, I have come to realize that issues pertaining to relational aggression can happen to anyone – students and adults alike. Listening to the comments and experiences of the participants made me question - what female has not been a victim of relational aggression by another female before? This thought directs me to what Brown (2003) suggests about girls who are deemed as ‘popular’ - since popular girls stand out amongst their peers, they are often victims of one particular mode of relationally aggressive behaviour – gossip. From this, I am inclined to wonder: what does the victim of relational aggression look like? How does severe bullying behaviour during childhood carry over into adulthood? These thoughts relate to research by Crothers, Lipinski, and Minutolo (2009) who recognize that relational aggression to women by women is a form of violence that occurs in many business organizations and needs to be taken seriously by management. By no means am I suggesting that this profession is one filled hostility, relational aggression, or antagonistic women, however, this research has led me to pay greater attention to the relationships and social dynamics of the work environments that I will be entering. I also keep all of these new learnings in mind as I take my first steps into the teaching profession, where the great majority of teachers are women.

All of these questions in turn, embolden me to be a more contentious observer of the teaching profession; at the same time, I am also motivated to be a more empathetic, kind, and welcoming teacher and colleague to every individual that I encounter in any school setting that I
find myself in. Doing so will be in hopes that other girls and women will be motivated to do the same. As I conclude the end of this research study, I am also called to evaluate my own self-concept and sense of self. This process has made me recognize the need to be self-assured, confident, and compassionate as a teacher, one that will not hesitate or waver when it comes to standing up for my students or for my colleagues.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of this study reveal several recommendations for school boards, school administrators, teachers, and parents as outlined below:

1. Schools can help ensure that appropriate opportunities to develop emotional and social intelligence, positive self-esteem, and to provide support to one another are made available to girls – this may include implementing programming or clubs designed specifically for females offered through community organizations (i.e. Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girls Inc., etc.). Administration can consider providing additional support to students in the form of social workers, guidance counselors, or other professional associations as needed (e.g. psychologists, police officers, or local or national partnerships such as Kids Help Phone, etc.).

2. All schools can help to create and maintain a positive and welcoming school atmosphere where teachers, administrators, and other staff members are able to communicate, support, and be collegial with one another. Doing so will in turn, encourage and motivate teachers – specifically female teachers who may feel isolated or are struggling – to feel
more confident in themselves in hopes that they will be motivated to provide the same support and care to their own students. Administration can consider providing support to teachers by developing weekly listening circles where staff can freely share their thoughts. Administration and teachers can also help boost school morale by being approachable and willing to listen, especially during times of stress.

3. Ministries of Education and school boards should aim to provide schools with tools, resources, and explicit strategies to educate parents, guardians, and families about bullying and bullying-related issues in manners that are culturally responsive and sensitive. This may include providing interpreters or translators or organizing meetings or workshops to take place in a specific language or community-setting as needed.

4. The Ontario Ministry of Education and teacher education programs can help to provide courses or workshops for pre-service teachers that focus on addressing social and emotional aspects of the teaching profession, which could and should encompass strategies and ways to respond to bullying. Current technology or professionalism courses could also incorporate discussions or lessons specifically about cyber-bullying and promoting digital citizenship for students and staff. Although more difficult to do, Ministries of Education and school boards should aim to transform professional development workshops about bullying or bullying-related issues in ways that would curtail disinterest due to redundancy or repetition of such work.

It is hoped that implementing these recommendations will reduce the occurrences of bullying between female students.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

This study reviewed literature and analyzed the perspectives and experiences of two teachers on relational aggression and bullying by female students towards other female students. The findings highlighted several important areas that deserve further attention and research. One avenue of further inquiry raised in this study is to explore whether or not student behaviour and development in the classroom – academically, socially, or emotionally – is impacted by a teacher’s self-esteem and behaviours. For future studies, it would be interesting to explore in greater depth if and how this student-teacher connection changes if both the student and teacher in question are female.

Future research can also investigate how the notion of self-concept and self-esteem of female teachers impacts other female teachers in their day-to-day teaching. Another important area of research would include exploring if bullying behaviours exhibited by girls in childhood carries over into behaviours of adult women, especially if these given childhood behaviours are prolonged and severe.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This study was designed with one central research question in mind: how do a sample of elementary teachers identify and respond to bullying and forms of relational aggression that takes place among female students? With this question driving the research, an investigation into the prevalent issue of girl-on-girl bullying was launched. The themes that emerged from the data were examined in terms of whether they converged or diverged from existing literature. As a result, effective approaches, strategies, and practices that teachers can use to identify and respond to female bullying were illuminated and include: 1) understanding the factors that shape and
promote girl-on-girl bullying; 2) implementing anti-bullying education and bullying prevention into the curriculum; 3) providing programming designed for female students that focus on social and emotional development, self-esteem building, and positive relationships; 4) the significance of providing support to students experiencing relational conflicts but also teaching self-advocacy; 5) involving parents and families about bullying scenarios and online activity in ways that are culturally responsive and effective; and 6) educating teachers through current and engaging ongoing professional development.

Correspondingly, through the research and analysis of the data, this study suggests that addressing female childhood bullying may also be important for adult women since it was suggested that relational issues concerning adult women may be rooted in childhood influences and experiences. If disregarded or not taken seriously by schools, educators, and families, girls who are bullied by other girls at school may sustain a great deal of social and emotional damage over time, all of which could impact her personal sense of self and self-esteem as a woman. Although further research in this area is needed and recommended, this study serves as a reminder as to why this present study is important for understanding the significance of the current landscape of female bullying in schools today. Findings from this research may be complemented by further research on female teachers, workplace environment, and notions of female self-concept. This study also underscores that both action and inaction by females in many bullying scenarios may be rooted in weak or deficient feelings of self-concept, self-esteem, and relationships.

Bullying remains a pervasive issue in many schools today. Directing the attention to the bullying that takes place specifically between female students in schools is a reminder to us all that although the nature of such incidences are subtle and may easily go unnoticed by many
teachers and parents, the consequences of such behaviours are direct, distinguishable, and potentially long-lasting. Embarking on this research journey has given me the opportunity to explore this topic in greater depth on both a professional and personal level. I have come to recognize that schools and teachers have a tremendous impact on the overall well-being and sense of worth of their female students, female teachers, and all teachers for that matter. It is my hope this study serves as a reminder to the people in the field of education that supporting girls and women to be strong-minded, positive, and supportive of one another benefits everyone inside and outside of the school setting.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Consent

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

[Date]

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Jennifer Nguyen and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teacher responses to forms of relational aggression among female students.

I am interested in interviewing teachers with a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience who are committed to anti-bullying education and have experience responding to relational bullying between girls. Bearing all of this in mind, I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Angela MacDonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Nguyen
(647) 993-7733
jennifervan.nguyen@mail.utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Jennifer Nguyen and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________

Name: (printed) ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank-you for participating in this interview. Your time is greatly appreciated. The aim of this research is to learn about your experience responding to relational aggression among female students. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes in total. I will ask you a series of questions focused on female bullying, current anti-bullying policies, and gender-specific programming. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question should you feel inclined. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

Section 1: Background Information
1. Can you please tell me what you teach, where you teach, and the grade level that you currently teach?
2. How many years have you worked as a teacher? How many years have you been teaching at your current school? Can you please tell me more about your current school? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities, popular extracurricular activities for students).
3. As you know, I am interested in your experience with anti-bullying education and more specifically with relational bullying and aggression between girls. Can you tell me more about what personal, professional, and educational experiences informed your commitment and interest in this work, and contributed to preparing you for it?
4. On a scale of 1-10, 10 being extremely common, how common would you say female-on-female bullying is among elementary students?
5. Approximately what percentage of the incidences of bullying that you have observed in your teaching career thus far involve relational aggression and bullying between girls?
6. Would you say that you have noticed an increase in the number of female bullying instances over the years?

Section 2: Beliefs and Values
1. What does bullying mean to you?
2. What does anti-bullying education mean to you? What does it/should it involve?
3. In your experience, what are some anti-bullying programs that you have seen in schools and classrooms, and what are some of the benefits and limitations of those programs that you have observed or experienced?
4. What do you believe is the role and responsibility of schools in responding to bullying between students?
5. How well do you think schools are doing, generally speaking, in their response to bullying and why? What changes to existing programs would you like to see and why?
6. Where in the curriculum do you see anti-bullying programming fitting? (i.e. subject areas, grades)
7. What anti-bullying policies are you aware of are in place in your school, school board, and province? What is your opinion about current policies and/or legislations that aim to combat bullying in schools? If you were to make some revisions to these current policies and/or legislations, what would you change and why?
8. More specifically now, I would like to focus on relational bullying and aggression between girls. Have you seen or been a part of programs in schools that focus on this form of bullying? If yes, which ones? How did these programs work?
9. In your experiences, what does relational bullying and aggression between female students look like?
10. What do you believe are some of the primary causes of this type of bullying?
11. In your experience, do teachers and schools respond differently to this form of bullying than they do to other forms of bullying? If yes, how? If not, why do you think that is?
12. In your experience, how common is it for technology and social media to play a role in relational aggression and bullying between girls? What social media platforms do you typically see involved in these incidences? To what extent do you think social media has changed the way in which students engage in bullying behaviour?
13. Do you believe that it a teacher’s responsibility to address Internet etiquette and behaviours that may take place outside of the classroom? Please explain why or why not.

Section 3: Teacher Practices
14. What are some indicators of relational aggression and bullying between girls that you have seen? How do you know when this is taking place?
15. From your experiences, would you say you would be able to recognize a female student who bullies?
16. How do you respond to these incidences when you see them? What instructional strategies or approaches do you enact and why? Which do you find to be effective and why? What are your learning goals? How do students typically respond? How do you hold them accountable and/or assess their learning?
17. Can you give me an example of a specific instance of relational aggression and bullying that you observed between female students?
   a. What happened? Who was involved?
   b. How did you respond and why?
   c. How did your students respond to you? How did you hold them accountable to their behaviour, if at all, or assess their learning?
18. Do you teach about anti-bullying and/or specifically about relational bullying and aggression between girls as part of your curriculum (not just reactively, but proactively)? Where do you locate this focus in the curriculum?
19. Can you give me an example of a lesson that you have conducted on this topic?
   d. What grade and subject area were you teaching?
   e. What were your learning goals?
   f. What opportunities for learning did you create?
   g. How did your students respond?
   h. What resources supported you in teaching this lesson?

Section 4: Influencing Factors
20. What resources have prepared and support you in your work on anti-bullying education?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol
21. What challenges have you encountered in this work? How do you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you to meet these challenges?

Section 5: Next Steps

1. What recommendations do you have for how beginning teachers preparation in the area of responding to the realities of bullying, generally, and relational bullying between girls, specifically, in schools?

2. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to anti-bullying education, but feeling unprepared to adequately respond to the many forms it takes today?

Those are all the questions I have for you today. I want to take this time to thank-you again for your time and participation in this study.