Teaching Girls to Be Assertive: Using Conflict Resolution Strategies to Teach Elementary Age Girls the Importance of Empowering One Another

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Abstract

Research shows that girls between the ages of four and fourteen years old are experiencing bullying by other girls in schools at an alarming rate. Bullying between girls is typically shown indirectly, which is also known as relational aggression (e.g. exclusion, gossiping). As Radliff and Joseph (2011) state “researchers are consistently reporting that girls involved in relational aggression are at an increased risk for internalizing and externalizing difficulties as well as other health related concerns” (p. 177).

The purpose of this study is to examine the conflict resolution strategies teachers use to help their female students maintain empowering relationships with other female students. The study delves into the social constructions of femininity and how that plays a major role in the ways in which girls show aggression towards each other.

The main question guiding this research is: How are teachers using conflict resolution strategies to help elementary-age girls maintain supportive and empowering friendships with other girls? Some subsidiary questions include: What are teachers’ experiences with conflicts between girls in their classrooms? What are the benefits and challenges of using conflict resolution strategies to help female students cope with bullying among their gendered friendship groups?

This research is a qualitative study where two educators were chosen to take part in a forty-five minute semi-structured interview. The findings from this study suggest that when teachers engage girls in conflict resolution strategies that allow them to share their stories and be collaborative, they see the importance of working together and empowering one another.

Key Words: Relational Aggression, Female Empowerment, Conflict Resolution
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

It was a day just like any other; I walked into my grade three classroom sat down and was ready to learn. The relationships that I made with my classmates consisted entirely of friendships with other girls. We played together, learned together and started to make meaning of power dynamics within our friendship groups. During our morning meeting I could hear the other girls whispering about me, I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying but I knew it wasn’t good. I had a knot in my stomach for most of the day wondering what I had done to make them so angry with me. By last recess it hadn’t gotten any better, the girls were ignoring and excluding me from their game of Mermaids and Sharks; it was like I did not exist to them anymore. Confused and deeply saddened by this exclusion I decided to try and figure out what the problem was because I desperately wanted my friends back. After some coercion I was finally told that one of the girls was upset because she didn’t like that I was wearing the same jeans as she was. I hadn’t noticed we were wearing the same jeans and to be honest, didn’t think they actually looked very similar but I was desperate to make amends. After some apologizing, I was invited back into the group. I can honestly say I have never quite forgotten the feeling of exclusion I experienced at that time. As a young girl I would have greatly benefitted from being taught how to deal with conflict by using an assertive voice to speak with my friends and collaboratively solve our problems. This research study was conducted to better understand how teachers can work towards supporting elementary-age girls to resolve conflict with one another in ways that empower rather than diminish because without the understanding of the importance of solidarity among female students, gender equity is far from sight.
1.1 Summary of Literature Review

The literature on this topic sheds much-needed light on just what relational aggression is, how to challenge gender stereotypes, the social construction of femininity and teaching strategies for coping with conflict among girls in the classroom. Radliff and Joseph (2011) describe relational aggression as “intent to damage a relationship between two or more individuals through subtle means (i.e., group exclusion, gossip), especially for one’s own advantage” (p. 171). The authors argue that this type of social aggression is steadily increasing in relationships among girls. Girls are taught to perform relational aggression because of socially constructed notions of femininity.

Ringrose and Renold (2010) argue that girls are taught to be “nice, non-competitive, and there-for-you” (p. 584). This learned behaviour encourages girls to be passive, kind, and nice without any encouragement to be assertive. Having these characteristics thrust upon them, young girls use relational or covert aggression to appear like they are being nice and kind when resolving conflict but are still bullying behind the scenes which can cause psychological harm to all students involved. Some of the ways in which teachers can use coping strategies to help girls deal with conflict in a constructive and assertive way is to teach girls to solve their problems collaboratively. Bell (1996) expresses the importance of using support groups for girls as a way to share their experiences and work collectively to come up with solutions. She argued that “through naming their problems and concerns collectively... it allowed them to see that the personal problems they suffered in silence were in fact shared widely by their peers and could thus be critiqued and challenged” (p. 419). Phinney (1994) also discusses using writing as a strategy to deal with conflict. She argues that girls may feel safer expressing themselves through the characters they create in a story leading to a much-needed dialogue about what she may be
going through. It is through this literature that I have grounded my own research which has helped develop and shape this study’s overall direction and purpose.

1.2 Research Problem

Bullying between girls is prevalent in our schools and can cause lasting effects on the lives of our students; Wolke, Copeland, Angold and Costello (2013) found that victims of relational aggression (e.g. exclusion, gossiping) have a higher chance of developing mental health problems and forming negative social relationships later in life (p.1967). How are teachers creating a safe space for their female students to explore dealing with conflict in an empowering, collaborative and assertive way? Teaching girls to empower each other, share their stories and believe in one another has the power to improve their self-esteem and set them up for future success while fostering an inclusive and positive classroom environment.

1.3 Purpose of this Research Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine how teachers use conflict resolution strategies to help elementary-age girls maintain empowering, positive and supportive relationships with other girls. In this study, societal expectations that influence girls’ behaviour are explored in relation to how girls construct relationships and express themselves when dealing with conflict among their female friendship groups. I am interested in how relational aggression among girls affects achievements in the classroom and how as educators we can better teach our female students to form strong and healthy relationships with each other.
1.4 Research Topic and Questions

The main question guiding this research is: How are teachers using conflict resolution strategies to help elementary-age girls maintain supportive and empowering friendships with other girls?

Subsidiary questions include:

1. What are teachers’ experiences with conflicts between girls in their classrooms?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of using conflict resolution strategies to help female students cope with bullying among their gendered friendship groups?
3. Why are teachers using specific conflict resolution strategies to address conflict among groups of girls and prevent female bullying in the future?
4. In what ways do teachers see conflicts among girls affecting their students academically and socially?

In this qualitative study I have used face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with two teachers to begin to answer these questions. The data was then coded to identify key words, similarities, differences, strengths and limitations as well as the gaps in the research that already exists.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

My interest in feminism, social constructions of femininity and social justice education started in my first year of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto. As a child growing up in suburban Ontario I fit nicely into the mold of “normalcy” that young women are forced to conform to. I am white, middle-class, straight, and have always identified as a feminine girl. In
middle and high school I had many female friends who were very supportive and encouraging; however I have also experienced interactions with girls that have been exclusionary and unkind. I began to question why it appeared that when boys had a conflict they tended to be more physically aggressive with one another and girls tended to be more relationally aggressive with one another (i.e. gossiping, excluding). During my first year at the University of Toronto I took my first Women’s Studies class which explained that gender is not something that is innate but rather constructed and enforced through societal expectations. It became clear to me that girls are constantly taught to prescribe to a certain notion of femininity (i.e. being nice, polite and quiet) and if you deviate from this norm you undoubtedly face some form of isolation and discrimination. As someone who identifies as a woman and will someday be teaching in a classroom of young impressionable minds I am well aware of my responsibility to my female students in particular, to demonstrate the importance of breaking down this notion of femininity and using our minds and voices to collaborate and assert ourselves in daily interactions. I am hopeful that by teaching my female students to support, empower and create a sisterhood that challenges systems of patriarchy, they will carry that learning on for the rest of their lives, creating a more equitable future for women.

1.6 Overview of Research Project

To accurately answer the aforementioned research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using interviews of two teachers on the extent to which they use specific conflict resolution strategies to provide support for girls in conflict with one another. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and the social constructions of femininity used to force girls to show covert or relational aggression when in conflict with one another. Chapter 3 elaborates on the research
design and methodology used. Chapter 4 reports on the findings and chapter 5 further discusses these findings and their future implications for the field of education.
2.0 Introduction

As a girl in elementary school, trying to navigate the various dynamics of friendship groups can be a confusing, daunting and difficult task. Having started my education in public school more than twenty years ago, it is in my experience that the ways in which a girl constructs and maintains friendships with other girls plays a major role in developing her self-esteem. It is all too often that we see girls struggling to be included and accepted within their gendered peer groups. As Mishna, Wiener and Pepler (2008) assert “girls who are friends with relationally aggressive girls may be especially vulnerable to being victimized within these dyadic friendships... these victimized children face significant psychosocial difficulties through relational aggression, such as loneliness, anxiety, depression and isolation” (p. 552).

In this literature review I present the research on the high prevalence of relational aggression among girls and the varying negative effects that arise from this. This is presented in the context of the research on the social construction of femininity, and how girls are taught to be passive beings that do not receive the help they need to constructively deal with conflict, resulting in the perpetuation of damaging relationships among female peer groups. Finally, the highlighted research discusses strategies for empowering girls to develop positive self-esteem by working together to challenge gender norms while constructing and maintaining positive friendships with other girls. Through examination of the research in combination with the study conducted my intention is to open up the conversation on the lifelong skills that are attained by teaching girls to be assertive during conflict.
2.1 Relational Aggression in Girls

2.1.1 What is Relational Aggression?

Radliff and Joseph (2011) argue that positive, healthy relationships among girls are declining and the rise of exclusion among group members through different forms of social aggression is steadily increasing. The authors describe this type of social aggression as relational aggression which is defined as “intent to damage a relationship between two or more individuals through subtle means (i.e., group exclusion, gossip), especially for one’s own advantage” (p. 171). Relational aggression can also be referred to as indirect or covert aggression. Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway (2012) explain that through their research study on children’s gendered perceptions of teasing among same-sex peer groups, “girls engage in a greater number of relationally aggressive acts focused on disparaging comments related to relationships and appearance” (p. 483). Radliff and Joseph concur with Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway by arguing that “relationally aggressive behaviour takes its form as teasing, withdrawing affection, gossiping, and excluding a peer intentionally” (p. 171). They argue that “girls regardless of their ethnicity have been found to engage in relational forms of aggression more frequently than physical forms of aggression and are more often victimized by relationally aggressive acts than boys” (p. 171). Relationally aggressive behaviour as studied by Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway is a learned behaviour that informs how girls manage conflict with each other. The social construction of the ways in which girls are taught to show aggression are explored later in this chapter.

Relational aggression is apparent in girls as young as three years old according to Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway’s (2012) study which included participants from junior kindergarten to grade three. The authors asked thirty-nine girls between the ages of four and nine years to draw something about teasing. Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway found that over
fifty percent of the girls drew a picture related to female teasing. Forty percent of the girls’ drawings depicted teasing directly connected to psychological aspects that related to appearance, as opposed to the fourteen percent of boys’ drawings that referenced indirect aggression related to teasing about their appearance. According to Radliff and Joseph (2011) “relational aggression is more apparent in middle school girls rather than elementary school girls” (p. 171) however, Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway’s study disproves this because they highlight that relationally aggressive behaviours effect girls in kindergarten. Although girls may be able to articulate their understanding of relational aggression better when they are in middle school the research proves that it starts to occur in schools at a very young age which further progresses well into middle school, high school and later in life.

The negative effects that indirect bullying has on an individual can be life-long. As Carlisle and Rofes (2007) discuss “survivors of school bullying describe long-term effects similar to those of survivors of childhood abuse” (p. 23). Carlisle and Rofes go on to site a research study conducted by Elliot and Shenton (1999) in the United Kingdom. They describe Elliot and Shenton’s study as being a “five-page questionnaire completed by approximately 1,000 adults, the majority being women. Of the respondents who had been bullied at school, 828 attributed a variety of effects in their adult lives to having being bullied: difficulties trusting others and fear of new situations (no percentage given), below-average self-esteem (43%), difficulties making friends (73%), and continuing to be bullied in their further education or in their place of employment (36%)” (p. 18). These lifelong effects appear to have a significant influence on the development of friendships and relationships that women make in the future, leading to feelings of isolation and perpetuating the cycle of trauma that begin in elementary school.
2.1.2 Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Although these authors are seeking to prove that relational aggression is prominent among elementary age girls, authors Chesney-Lind, Morash and Irwin (2007) argue that studying relational aggression as solely a girls’ way of showing aggression perpetuates stereotypes that all women and girls are “innately sneaky, manipulative, mean-spirited and back-stabbing” (p. 333). The authors contend that studying relational aggression as a gendered issue is actually devaluing and demonizing girls and asserting that we should police their behaviour even more than we already are. The authors found that when varying types of verbal aggression were included in the overall study of aggression only five percent of the variance was explained by gender, they suggest that simply “by using a broader definition of aggression it would prove that relational aggression is prominent in both boys and girls” (p. 334). They believe that there needs to be “larger sample sizes when conducting studies about relational aggression, multiple measurement techniques as well as whether the studies include singular relationally aggressive acts or multiple acts committed repeatedly” (p. 334).

2.1.3 Gaps in the Research

Radliff and Joseph and Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway all discuss that relational aggression between elementary aged girls, however, these authors only briefly discuss the systemic, institutional and social influences that construct how girls believe they should show aggression. Chesney-Lind, Morash and Irwin (2007) make a valid argument that we need to challenge stereotypes and myths about girls being perceived as “devious” or “venomous” (p. 332). The ways in which these social constructs are embedded in our society and institutions needs to be further explored if girls are to be taught how to assert themselves and empower each other.
2.2 Social Constructions of Femininity

2.2.1 The “Nice” Girl

In the second section of this literature review I highlight the ways in which girls are taught to perform acts of relational aggression because of socially constructed notions of femininity. When we examine the concept of femininity, it becomes clear that by inadvertently teaching girls to act feminine we are in fact reinforcing the gender inequities that are so prevalent within our social systems. As Budgeon (2014) states “the social production of difference is not neutral for as long as women and men see themselves as different kinds of people women will not expect to occupy a similar position within social structures and therein lies the power of gender” (p. 318). The power of gender is evident in Ringrose and Renold’s (2010) study on gendered bullying discourse. They found that to “adequately perform the normative subject position of girl in the contexts of compulsory heterosexuality means to be ‘nice’ (i.e. caring, good, nurturing, sexually innocent/respectable” (p. 584). They argue that the idea of the “naturalness” associated with relational or covert aggression in girls is a myth that highlights the gender norms and expectations associated with girls being nice. In Sheldon’s (1992) study of gender and conflict talk she studies thirty-six children between the ages of three to five years old who were put into same-sex triads and observed while they interacted. She found that “the major technique that girls use to negotiate their agendas during conflicts is that of mitigation, which is defined as ‘modifying one’s expression to avoid creating offense’” (p. 107). She argues that this can make it harder for girls to present themselves or be heard by others, explaining that girls are not innately less assertive than boys but that in our society boys are encouraged to engage in open dialogue or confrontation and girls are not. In relation to Ringrose, Renold and Sheldon’s descriptions of the construction of femininity in young girls, Read’s (2011) study on primary and
secondary school girls’ role models discusses how girls perceive the traits of passivity in their older female role models. Read states that out of one hundred and fifty-four girls between the ages of seven and eight years old, twenty-four girls wanted to be Britney Spears or Beyoncé when they grew up and thirty-five wanted to be like their female teacher. The reasons that the girls gave for wanting to be like these pop stars or their female teacher was based on appearance and personality. She mentions that the girls cited these people as role models because of their “niceness”, “kindness” and “friendliness” (p. 8) which she points out are “dominant culturally ascribed feminine characteristics” (p. 8). Researchers Peirce and Edwards (1988) conducted a study which asked boys and girls aged nine to fourteen years old to write a story about anything with no restrictions. They found that girls wrote about female characters that “used reasoning, analysis, trickery and avoidance to resolve conflict... also highlighted were that boys characters were active and girls were passive” (p. 403).

This research suggests that girls are not born with a “niceness” gene; it is simply ascribed to them as they become socialized into gendered norms of thinking and doing. These ascribed characteristics tend to result in the use of relational aggression as a means to appear like they are enacting “niceness” when resolving conflict, but in reality can cause serious psychological trauma to all students involved.

2.2.2 Lack of Diversity in the Research

These authors have proven that the social construction of femininity exists and certainly functions within the school system. I believe their studies lack a deeper analysis of how socio-economic status and race can play a major role in the construction of what it means to be “feminine”. In Sheldon’s (2010) study she acknowledges the fact that she used predominately
white middle-class children to better understand conflict resolution, which shows who her intended audience is and greatly diminishes the fact that girls of colour from low socio-economic backgrounds face much more challenging systemic oppressions that can greatly influence how they show aggressive behaviours. Read (2011) specifies that she used a variety of girls from ethnic backgrounds in her study, however, out of three hundred and seven participants, one-hundred and fifty-four were girls, two hundred and seven of the participants were white and only twenty of the participants were black. Ringrose and Renold (2010) briefly discuss the need for more studies that include girls of colour, however, they fail to delve into the reasons why they are not already included and why it is important that they are. Peirce and Edwards (1988) let it be known that “the sample was predominately white, five percent was black and one percent was Asian” (p. 396). This shows a significant lack of cross cultural evidence as well as investigation of the intersectionalities that so prominently affect a girl’s identity, how she constructs and maintains friendships, and how she deals with conflict.

2.3 Empowering Girls to Empower Each Other

2.3.1 Teaching Strategies for Coping with Conflict

Besag (2006) argues that the first step towards empowering girls to resolve conflicts assertively rather than aggressively is to teach them the strategies they need to deal with these issues constructively. Many times relational aggression is deemed just another insignificant act of ‘girlhood’. Besag believes it is important that conflicts among girls be taken seriously enough to be considered as acts of bullying. She states that “techniques involving restorative justice and self focused practice are useful tools for girls in conflict” (p. 549). Bell (1996) agrees with Besag in that girls should be taught techniques and strategies to help them cope with conflict and resolve their problems collaboratively. Bell’s study consisted of two groups of girls; one group
was comprised of eight to nine year olds and the other, eleven to twelve year olds. She discusses that the groups were formed as a means for “individual girls to explore their experiences in a supportive group and through naming their problems and concerns collectively...by doing so it allowed them to see that the personal problems they suffered in silence were in fact shared widely by their peers and could thus be critiqued and challenged” (p. 419). Bell highlights the extremely positive outcome of these support groups stating that the groups provided a safe space where the girls knew they could trust and learn from one another while discovering that they were not alone. She also makes it very clear that the girls were able to discuss taboo subjects like “implicit rules of the school, popularity and social relations...this opportunity gave them time for cross-race, cross-grade dialogue that fostered the solidarity and mutual support they needed to empower each other and name and critique the school culture and norms that opposed their interest” (p. 420).

Phinney (1994) observed a group of elementary girls for one year in terms of how they interacted with one another and managed conflicts while keeping their friendship groups intact. Phinney describes that the “girls in this study used the activity of writing stories as a vehicle for managing social tensions surrounding the problem of fulfilling both their personal and group agendas” (p. 315). She realized that the girls were speaking through the characters in the stories they were creating to resolve their differences with their friends while maintaining an assertive voice. Through this study it is evident that these girls were trying to navigate the fine line between being assertive and being “feminine”. They are using writing as a strategy to work through conflict because they feel safe in expressing themselves through their characters, much like role playing. This relates back to Besag’s (2006) point that “girls value their friendships highly... they need to be offered a comfortable, supportive problem-solving forum where they
can discuss and cognitively rehearse, possible coping strategies” (p. 548). I would argue that
when used together, support groups and writing sessions provide a solid opportunity for girls to
express themselves through writing but also allows for a chance to follow up with a discussion
where they can learn from each other. Besag, Bell and Phinney have offered effective strategies
for first and foremost providing an opportunity for girls to engage in a dialogue around the
problems that so intricately connect them. Providing this opportunity not only forces girls to
think critically about societal pressures to conform to a prescribed way of enacting girlhood but
it flips this notion of the “helpless” and/or “devious” girl onto its head by showing girls that
when they stand in solidarity with each other and work together, they can empower one another
to speak out against injustice and challenge the system.

Empowering young girls to ultimately question and critique systems of oppression and
the role of gender conformity in their lives is not an easy task. Support groups are a wonderful
way to start this process of self-exploration, however, it is important to remember that it will take
time for girls to feel comfortable enough to share their stories with one another. Not all girls will
want to take part in dissecting these complicated issues but at the very least they should be given
the option to participate and feel like their voices are being heard.

2.4 Conclusion

As a young girl it can be hard to build and maintain friendships, especially when you are
trying to figure out your own identity. I think it would have greatly benefitted my own self-
esteeom had I been presented with the opportunity to discuss what I was feeling and the problems
that I was having with other girls in my school. As a young, white, middle class student
growing up in suburban Ontario I recognize that my experience with relational aggression among
female students was very different than that of someone from a predominately low-
socioeconomic, racialized background.

While I cannot speak for all girls, as every girl has her own experience with friendship
and conflict, I can argue that the research is beginning to explore and understand that girls
commit more relationally aggressive acts towards one another, and this has lasting negative
effects. I believe that this is just another symptom of the systemic injustices that girls face every
day. It is time to start teaching young girls about what it means to resolve conflict through
assertive and collaborative strategies and just how they can positively influence one another to
question, challenge and deconstruct gender stereotypes while living empowered and unified
lives.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter Overview

In this chapter the research methodology is explained in relation to research purpose and questions. In the beginning the research approach and procedure used are highlighted as well as the methods of data collection. Then the participants used in the study are introduced, providing information about their backgrounds. Next is a discussion on the sampling criteria and sampling procedures, then interpretations on the data are recognized in connection to any relevant ethical issues that have arisen and been addressed. Finally, a discussion on the methodological strengths and limitations of the study is presented to ensure quality and validity in the research.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

The study was conducted using a qualitative research study approach, including a review of the existing literature as well as the conduction of face-to-face interviews with two teachers. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is conducted to examine intricate topics, hear multiple perspectives and produce “a complex, detailed understanding of an issue” (p. 48). He argues that qualitative research is used to “measure interactions among people, especially when existing measures may not be sensitive to gender differences, race, economic status and individual differences... qualitative research is simply a better fit for our research problem” (p. 48). Considering that the research problem stems from social constructions of gender and ultimately gender inequity, using qualitative research was vital to capturing information that acknowledges varying perspectives and life experiences. As authors Jackson II, Drummond and Camara (2007) stated “quantitative research relies on a set of finite questions to elicit categorized, forced-choice responses with little room for open-ended replies to questions” (p.
23). The authors acknowledge that the qualitative researcher elicits “rich and detailed discussions” from their participants which “generates much more information about a phenomenon” (p. 23). Therefore, qualitative research is used in this study because in order to explore how teachers observe conflict between girls in their classrooms and to further examine how they choose to address those conflicts, open-ended questions that recognize their lived experiences must be asked to achieve a thorough and accurate understanding of perspectives.

### 3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

According to Jackson II, Drummond and Camara (2007) when conducting qualitative research “generally, semi-structured or unstructured, open-ended, informal interviewing is preferred to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent” (p. 25). Conducting these in-depth, flexible interviews allows the participants to speak with candor, providing the best possible information for the data being collected. Semi-structured interviews were mainly used in this study because as authors DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) recognize “semi-structured interviews are usually organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee” (p. 315). Open-ended questions were used to ensure that participants felt they could be candid, and in-depth with their answers. Participants were worked with individually rather than in groups so as to get the most focused and deep discussion possible. Research questions are organized into four sections, starting with introducing the participants background, followed by questions about the participants experiences with conflict between girls in their classrooms, then how they perceive the social construction of gender to play a role in how girls treat each other in school and finally, questions regarding how they choose to deal with conflicts among girls and what supports and next steps
they can offer for future teachers dealing with these conflicts. Refer to Appendix B for a list of the interview questions that were used.

3.3 Participants

Choosing participants for a qualitative research study is vital to deconstructing and addressing your research problem. Both participants chosen not only share an understanding of qualitative research but have been classroom teachers for more than ten years and have a great depth of knowledge and experience working with children from various backgrounds and communities. Below all decisions made regarding participant selection are addressed.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Both teachers were recruited based on their experiences working with girls in conflict with one another in the classroom. Each participant is female and has over ten years of teaching experience. Both participants have taught in the Greater Toronto Area for majority of their careers. Participants were selected based on their understanding of feminist approaches to conflict resolution among girls and their commitment to providing an empowering and safe space for girls to deal with conflict and problem solving collaboratively.

3.3.2 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through OISE practicum placements and peer and personal connections. As this study was developing I decided on two characteristics that each participant would need to be involved. It was important that they were female because it is my intention to highlight the importance of female educators acting as positive female role models for their younger female students who may be dealing with the effects of conflict within their gendered friendship groups. The participants also needed to have at least five years of teaching experience, so they could speak to a range of situations and experiences. According to Mack et
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al (2005) this sampling strategy is called quota sampling, “in quota sampling, we decide while designing the study how many people with which characteristics to include as participants... the criteria we choose allow us to focus on people we think would be most likely to experience, know about, or have insights into the research topic” (p. 5).

3.3.3 Participant Bios

Two teachers within Ontario were chosen to discuss their experiences dealing with conflict among their female students. Each educator currently teaches in the Ontario Public School system. Lily is an elementary school teacher with over ten years of experience. She has taught physical education from junior kindergarten to grade eight. She has been a classroom teacher in kindergarten and grade one classrooms for the past six years. The majority of her career was spent in a public school located in a suburban town in the western Greater Toronto Area. Lily has experienced many conflicts between girls at the primary level and has developed several strategies and techniques for dealing with those conflicts in a fair and collaborative manner.

Maya currently teaches grade four in a school located in a rural community north west of the greater Toronto area. She has eleven years of teaching experience in Ontario. In addition to teaching grade four, Maya also has a wide range of experience teaching in grade one to grade six classrooms. She has seen the conflicts that arise between girls both in primary and junior grades and can speak to the ways in which these students have shown aggression and how she chooses to work through conflicts appropriately.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is an important part in the qualitative research process. First, collecting the data and then analyzing it to pull out any themes, connections, misconceptions and/or patterns is
essential to making sense of the data and ultimately providing rich and conclusive information to your study and field of research. The template approach is described by DiCicco, Bloom and Crabtree (2006) as “transcribing the interviews and coding the data” (p.318). I extracted themes and inaccuracies in the findings while discussing the significance of the data in the lives of students and teachers.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) discuss several ethical issues that arise when conducting interviews for qualitative research. These issues are as follows:

1. Reducing the risk of unanticipated harm
2. Protecting the interviewees information
3. Informing the interviewee about the nature of the study
4. Reducing the risk of exploitation

Reducing the risk of unanticipated harm to the teachers that participated in the study was extremely important. I recognized that asking women to speak about their experiences dealing with conflict among girls in their classrooms can also trigger feelings from their own experiences being bullied by girls in elementary school. I acknowledged through my own experience that these memories can be traumatic for many women. This problem was countered by providing the interviewee with a copy of the questions before the interview. It was also made clear to them that they could skip any questions they did not want to answer and could leave the interview at any time. It was my full intention to ensure that the participant felt comfortable and safe answering these questions. The participant information was protected by informing the participant that they were given a pseudonym in the study and any information that might compromise their identity was not used. The participant was also informed that any data
received from them would be stored on a password protected hard-drive and destroyed after five years. Participants were properly informed about the study through a written overview of the purpose as well as the expectations of those involved. They were given a written consent form they signed to give permission to be recorded for the purposes of this study. (Refer to Appendix A for a copy of this.) Finally, after the study was completed I shared the information and data with the interviewee which hopefully aided them in their future teaching practice. Furthermore, I endeavored to make the interviewee aware of their contribution to the study and the valuable information they provided for new teachers.

3.6 Limitations and Strengths

As Tracy (2010) states “high-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundance” (p.841). In this study the abundance of which Tracy speaks about cannot be met because we could only interview a select few teachers due to the Master of Teaching Research Project Ethical Review Protocol which states that the inclusion of students, parents, surveys or classroom observation is forbidden. The “rich complexity of abundance” that Tracy refers to also highlights the need for rich rigor in high quality qualitative research. Limiting the number of interviewees we ask to participate in our study restricts the variety and depth in data collection. She also mentions the importance of using multivocality in qualitative research by stating that “multivocal research includes multiple and varied voices in the qualitative report and analysis” (p.844). This study is limiting in the perspectives we could capture due to that fact that we could not interview students or parents. Multivocality is not represented in this study which makes the data difficult to generalize across teachers and school boards.

A methodological strength of this study includes using interviews as a way to collect meaningful data as opposed to using a survey. Using interviews as a way to collect data evokes
a more personal, informative discussion that truly highlights the lived experiences of teachers. Conducting interviews with open-ended questions provided the opportunity for teachers to truly delve into topics that matter and that have the power to change their teaching practice for the better.

3.7 Conclusion: Overview and Preview of what is Next

In this chapter the research methodology used in this study was discussed. Next highlighted was the research procedure and approach which moved into talking about the instruments used for data collection, stating that interviews are the primary tool used. Then, the interviewees were identified by providing a short synopsis about each one as well as the criteria used to select each participant. Next I described how the data was analyzed, looking for patterns, themes and gaps. Ethical review procedures such as; unanticipated harm, protecting interviewee information, informing the participant of the nature of the study and exploitation were examined, considered and addressed. Finally, the limitations of the study including; lack of multivocal research and abundance were explored, also highlighted were the strengths involved with using interviews as a way to showcase the lived experience of teachers. In chapter 4, a report on the findings of the research is addressed.
Chapter 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents and discusses the themes and findings that came out of the data analysis of two research interviews with educators. While analyzing the data I was cognisant of the research question: How are teachers using conflict resolution strategies to help elementary-age girls maintain supportive and empowering friendships with other girls? Through the analysis of teacher experiences and the Chapter 2 literature review, several themes emerged. The three themes outlined in this chapter are as follows:

1. Teachers’ experiences with conflict between female students.
2. Identifying factors which influence conflict between girls.
3. Practical strategies for conflict resolution.

Each theme has sub-themes that further expand on the research findings and literature connections. Each theme is described, analyzed in connection to the data findings and discussed in relation to the existing literature explored in Chapter 2.

4.1 Teachers Experiences with Conflict between Female Students

The participants in this study both had many experiences dealing with conflict between female students. As a kindergarten and grade one teacher for most of her career Lily’s experiences with conflict between girls was set largely in the primary setting with girls aged four to six years old. Maya’s experiences working mostly in junior grades and in particular grade four, set the context for her experience with conflict between girls primarily aged eight to nine years old. One of the most significant pieces of information from this study is the examination of the first-hand experiences these teachers have witnessed in relation to conflict between girls in
their classrooms. First, a discussion on recent conflicts between girls takes place, next an analysis of how girls showed aggression towards one another is discussed. Finally, a comparison in how the participants have experienced conflicts between female students and conflicts between male students is explored.

4.1.1 Conflict and Displays of Aggression between Girls

Both educators interviewed expressed an overwhelming number of conflicts between girls in their classrooms over the ten plus years they have been teaching. When asked to describe some of the conflicts between girls Lily experienced she began by saying “a lot of the time the conflict is about exclusion, it could be that two girls were friends prior or that someone has joined the play late and they don’t want to incorporate anyone new whether it’s in the classroom or during a nutrition break”. Maya also made reference to one of the most recent conflicts she witnessed in her grade four classroom where a student she perceived to be a leader became increasingly jealous of another girl because of her friendship with other people in the class. As a result of her jealously “when this other girl was around she would lean over and whisper something to one of her friends, telling her friends that she didn’t think it was a good idea that they were friends with her and shouldn’t invite her to play anymore.” Lily went on to name the type of aggression she sees girls displaying in her grade one classroom:

With girls I have rarely seen physical aggression; it’s sort of words and actions that can be so much more hurtful. The words that they choose and how they make someone feel through their actions; ignoring somebody, telling someone that they aren’t good enough or whatever it is. With girls it’s a mind game always.
Maya’s understanding of the aggression that girls show was similar to Lily’s. She said “her behaviour was aggressive, not physically aggressive but aggressive; I would label her behaviour as bullying because she became extremely unkind.” Both Lily and Maya’s description of their encounters with bullying between female students as well as the ways in which their students have shown aggression towards one another is not particularly surprising. As Radliff and Joseph (2011) state “the most frequently reported forms of relationally aggressive behavior are teasing, name calling, gossiping (spreading rumors or lies), withdrawing affection, intentionally excluding (leaving out) a peer, and threatening to withdraw friendships” (p. 171). The relationally aggressive behaviour described by both Lily and Maya makes a significant impact on the climate and community of the classroom, which can result in a lack of desire to come to school for fear of being targeted. As Maya says:

I think a lot of girls tend to keep their aggression or their response to a conflict or their reaction to a conflict, to themselves until it escalates to a point where it is out of control and they are absolutely beside themselves in tears or they are going home at night and saying they don’t want to come to school the next day.

This information highlights the traumatic effects that relationally aggressive behaviour can have on all facets of a student’s life. It is important to further analyze and compare the differences in bullying between female students and male students if we are to better understand the reasons behind the prominence of relationally aggressive behaviour.

4.1.2 Differences in Conflicts between Male and Female Students

It is clear that both participants found a common thread in how their female students displayed aggression when in conflict. It is important to identify if and how there are differences in the ways in which male and female students handle conflict and display aggression, and if
those differences reflect a deeper meaning related to the social constructions of gender. When asked if Maya saw any differences in how boys and girls acted when in conflict with each other, she said “with boys they say it out right, they get mad at each other and then they move on... I always know instantly when some of my boys walk into the room, I’m like ‘oh they had a fight’ I know they are upset about something.” She goes on to say that with girls they “let things boil and it kind of grows and grows until it’s out of control which makes it hard as a teacher because sometimes you’re not even aware of this aggression until it is brought to your attention.” This last point confirms the idea presented by Besag (2006) that “there is a delay in recognizing these behaviours as bullying interactions which is partly due to the difficulty in identifying and tracking these negative, subtle social behaviours used by girls in disputes (p. 537).” It becomes increasingly more difficult for teachers to identify when relationally aggressive behaviour takes place because “it is more difficult to ignore the bad behaviour of boys as they more usually turn to overt modes of direct aggression” (p. 537). How do educators support girls in dealing with conflict if they are not aware of what is taking place? This is a question I hope to answer through further exploration and understanding of the root causes and triggers behind the conflicts and aggression between female students.

4.2 Identifying Factors that Influence Conflict between Girls

The analysis of the root causes and triggers of conflict between female students is a vital part of better understanding how to address these issues appropriately. When analyzing how participants have experienced conflict triggers between girls I used a critical lens to pull out underlying themes of the social constructions of gender and femininity.
4.2.1 The Role of Femininity in Conflict Triggers

In Maya’s grade four classroom a few major conflict triggers she identified were jealously and insecurity, she went on to say:

I think the biggest thing is insecurity, although I don’t think girls recognize that outright, their insecurity about themselves, about their appearance, their friendships and popularity and how they are perceived, girls tend to not like other girls because of the way they dress or because of the way they look. I think sometimes they don’t like other girls because of who they associate with or who their friends are and they are jealous of what they have and what they perceive themselves as not having.

As Ringrose and Renold (2010) state “a primary way girls are socially sanctioned to express meanness is through subtle and direct regulation of other girls’ sexuality... it is normative for girls to position themselves and others in sexual hierarchies, invoking regulative discourses around sexuality, appearance and behaviour in the private spaces of their friendship groups as a mode of constructing idealised femininity” (p. 585). Constructed femininity acts as a guiding force in the way girls maintain friendships and address conflicts with one another. Young girls are learning the normative behaviours associated with gender by the time they enter school. Lily describes her experiences in kindergarten and grade one classrooms:

It’s pretty evident that you see boys and girls gravitate towards different things in school... there’s definitely a pull for boys and girls towards different types of play...I think sometimes girls will find a common ground based on the dolls that they have or the toys that they bring to school.
It is important to recognize the construction of masculinity and femininity through the play that students are engaging in throughout their primary years. Sheldon (1992) describes the gendered play that students engage in the primary years as a “reflection of an androcentric culture where females learn they should be more accommodating to others and pay attention to the relational aspects of social interaction” (p.114). Sheldon’s description of a culture that teaches femininity is precisely what holds female students back from dealing with conflict in an assertive manner. Instead of confronting an issue directly they are taught to enact their role as the docile, passive and nurturing female by either holding their feelings in or by using relational or covert aggression which Lily says “can be so much more hurtful and long lasting than physical altercations.”

4.3 Strategies for Conflict Resolution

Thinking through some of the strategies that may help in teaching girls to be assertive during conflicts while highlighting the connections and relationships that bring girls together is integral to this study. It is my intention to present these strategies as a means to discuss the ways in which educators can successfully work towards empowering female students to empower each other.

4.3.1 Collaborative Problem Solving

Lily and Maya both discussed the need for collaborative problem solving when working through conflict between girls. Below Lily describes her experience with collaborative problem solving (CPS):

CPS helps to give a voice to some of those kids who maybe aren’t able to find that voice and give them a framework for having conversations. So, identifying exactly what the problem is and then getting the students to identify possible solutions. It comes from
them, from their understanding and what will make everybody happy in the end and then trying that solution and revisiting it with a lot of empathy towards the person that has the problem and making them feel like their concerns are valid and important.

Collaborative problem solving gives students the opportunity to solve the problem and have their perspectives and opinions heard and validated. Instead of the teacher making the decisions about how to solve the problem it is an opportunity, as Lily says, “for students to hone their skills in problem solving and communicating.” CPS is a student centered approach which challenges the child to assert themselves and problem solve as a team. Lily also mentioned that CPS is so powerful because “it’s a non-judgemental way to open the conversation up because it’s not a blame game.” As Bell (1996) mentions in order to teach girls how to be assertive we must recognize that “translating awareness into action requires support and opportunity to experiment” (p. 423). Collaborative problem solving is an opportunity for girls to work together to come to a resolution, although this approach is student directed it is important for teachers to act as a support and facilitator of the discussion. Overall, as Maya pointed out “the CPS philosophy is that kids will do well if they can and if kids are behaving in a way that’s disrespectful or aggressive there’s a reason behind it.” Understanding the reasons behind the behaviour is of the utmost importance in helping girls to find their voice and assert themselves during conflict – collaborative problem solving is a tool that will help them develop their problem solving skills through open and direct communication.

**4.3.2 Making Connections through Social Support Groups**

Providing a space for female students to connect with each other, share their stories and bridge their differences is a significant part of learning the importance of empowering one
another. Lily discussed putting together a girl’s social group as a means to bring girls together. She said “we did this girls social group after school and really the main goal was just to bring them together and create a relationship... we’d have snack and they could do a craft, we’d do teambuilding activities to get them talking and depending on each other.” Maya also commented on the need to provide a space for interaction and connection between female students saying:

Teaching girls about supporting each other is important; I think that you have to get students to understand the importance of being honest with each other and with themselves about their own feelings. Hopefully they can get to a point where they are comfortable sharing those feelings and even recognizing those feelings with other girls. I think it is possible to get there but you need to make sure that they have a safe an honest space to recognize those feelings.

Lily also discussed how the social support group for girls can change in its direction every year depending on the needs of the students. She asserted “this year the social group was based more on social skills, so making sure we were sharing and communicating effectively, that sort of thing. It has a bit of a different look but is still meeting the needs of our students.” Giving female students the space, resources and strategies to come together to debrief about what they are experiencing in their lives, gives them the chance to connect on a deeper level. It shows them that they are not alone and that they have the power to critique and challenge the systems of oppression at play in their lives. Bell (1996) says, “the social solidarity and insights that girls develop in consciousness raising groups can become the basis for collective action” (p. 426). It is within these shared spaces that meaningful discussions are able to take place, provoking a shift in thought and a stronger understanding of the connections that unite girls and women universally.
4.4 Conclusion

The findings from the interviews conducted for this study go hand-in-hand with most of the research presented in the literature review section. The experiences that both educators have with conflict between girls demonstrate the ways in which girls show aggression towards each other. Both teachers said they had never seen girls get physically aggressive with each other but have experienced numerous incidences of covert or relational aggression over their almost ten years of teaching. In their research Radliff and Joseph (2011) confirmed that “girls, have been found to engage in relational forms of aggression more frequently than physical forms of aggression and are more often victimized by relationally aggressive acts than boys (p. 171).

Lily and Maya also spoke to witnessing the exclusion and gossiping that took place as a means for certain girls to demonstrate their power and aggression towards other girls. Chesney-Lind, Morash and Irwin (2007) describe relational or indirect aggression: as “talking about other girls; spreading rumors; breaking confidences; criticizing others’ clothing, appearance, or personality; exclusionary behaviors; making prank phone calls; writing about other girls on desks; and sarcasm” (p. 330). The ways in which both participants experienced forms of aggression between girls appears to align with the aforementioned research.

Lily and Maya also mentioned the reasons behind the aggressive behaviour and what they thought was triggering the conflicts between their female students. Both discussed the underlying themes of insecurity and jealousy that often sparked conflicts. Maya spoke directly to the fact that many girls are “insecure about themselves, about their appearance, their friendships and popularity and how they are perceived, girls tend to not like other girls because of the way they dress or because of the way they look.” In Bosacki, Harwood and Sumaway’s (2012) study of children’s perceptions of gendered teasing they found that “compared to boys,
girls’ teasing tends to focus more on appearance and social relationships, which in turn may be hurtful to girls, who focus their self-worth on appearance and friendship” (p. 475). The idea of girls basing their self-worth on appearance and social status leads directly into the concept of the social constructions of gender and femininity.

The relationally aggressive behaviour that Lily and Maya witnessed points to the fact that girls are subtly taught that being assertive is not feminine, as Ringrose and Renold (2010) state “where norms of masculinity call for the performance of toughness and sanction violence, femininity calls upon girls to perform niceness” (p. 584). The niceness that Ringrose and Renold speak of can be seen in the experiences of both Lily and Maya. Both teachers found that their female students used subtle indirect aggression to exclude other girls from play without appearing to be aggressive on the surface, so much so that the teachers often were not aware of the conflict.

Finally, the strategies that the participants discussed in relation to dealing with conflict between female students were mostly convergent with the literature previously studied. The dialogue on social support groups for female students was heavily supported and discussed by Bell (1996) who said “the opportunity for girls to challenge previously unspoken norms and assumptions, to see that their experiences are shared by others and to imagine and discuss alternatives helps to build solidarity and support” (p. 427). Both teachers were engaging in providing the space for female support groups to happen in a meaningful way and they were seeing results because of it. The discussion the teachers brought forward on collaborative problem solving is rich. The literature on the use of collaborative problem solving with girls specifically is limited because most researchers speak to the fact that it is effective in dealing with all types of conflicts not just conflict between girls or relational aggression exclusively.
More specific case studies related to using collaborative problem solving specifically with girls would be beneficial for future research.

Overall, the findings of this analysis highlight the fact that relational aggression between female students is a prevalent issue that holds deep seeded underpinnings of socially constructed gender norms and expectations. Through conflict resolution strategies that promote awareness, discussion and collaboration between girls we can begin to unpack these issues and empower female students to empower one another. Next in Chapter five, I further discuss the implications for these findings, draw broader conclusions and recognize the areas for further research.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter/Overview

The present study was designed to learn more about conflict resolution strategies that educators use to teach girls about the importance of female empowerment through assertive behaviour. The findings serve to support the extant literature pertaining to the underlying reasons behind conflict between girls and to specifically tell us more about strategies and resolutions used to address these conflicts. This chapter summarizes the research findings, highlights the present study’s implications for various stakeholders, provides several recommendations, and suggests directions for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

The study was conducted to examine teachers’ experiences with conflict between girls and to investigate and unpack how girls show aggression towards each other in relation to the social construction of femininity. Following interviews with two educators, a rigorous analysis revealed three important themes: 1. Teachers’ experiences with conflict between girls consistently show female students using relational and covert aggression toward one another. 2. How girls resolve conflict and show aggression is deeply rooted in the social construction of femininity. 3. Teachers’ uses of collaborative conflict resolution strategies work to empower female students to empower each other.

The first theme highlights that conflicts arising between girls are not isolated incidents but rather occurrences that are consistently seen across varying school communities and grade levels. This serves as a reminder that examining the patterns observed in teachers’ experiences with conflict between girls plays a major role in deciphering the underlying causes as well as strategies for resolution. Both teacher participants cited that conflicts between girls most often
arose because of jealousy and insecurity. They also described exclusion, gossiping and teasing as the most prominent ways aggression was enacted. These findings indicate that female students generally show aggression towards one another relationally and indirectly rather than physically, which as the literature states, results in lifelong trauma.

The second theme delves into how social constructions of femininity play a major role in the ways in which girls show aggression. This theme shines a light on how girls enact femininity through displays of relational aggression rather than assertiveness. It also shows that when teachers confront and disrupt typical notions of femininity that construct girls as passive and docile, girls feel encouraged to become more active and assertive participants both in their academic and social development.

The third and final theme to emerge from the research highlighted the importance of using conflict resolution strategies that teach girls to be collaborative, supportive and reflective. These findings serve educators with practical strategies that challenge gender norms and empower young women. The research showed that collaborative problem solving, support and discussion groups as well as story and journal writing, helped girls to make connections, listen to and support each other. It is through these strategies that teachers are able to provide students with the space and necessary tools to work through conflict assertively, a valuable skill they can carry with them throughout their lives.

5.2 Implications

The present study has important implications for educational reform. In broad strokes, this study should serve as a reminder to policymakers and curriculum planners that the social construction of gender is heavily embedded within the education system. Consistent with the
conclusions of Ringrose and Renold (2010), the present study finds that girls consistently use acts of relational or covert aggression (i.e. gossiping, exclusion) to deal with conflict in order to adhere to the constructs of femininity, which prescribes girls to be ‘nice’ and ‘well-mannered’. The study also provides novel insight into the long term effects of indirect bullying that policymakers should be aware of.

The study also has two implications for educators experiencing conflicts between female students. First, teachers’ lack of training around this issue leads to the lack of education female students receive about the importance of empowerment through assertion of feelings, beliefs and opinions and hinders their ability to be assertive and trusting in many aspects of their lives. This is consistent with Sheldon’s (1992) argument that girls’ constant use of mitigation makes it very difficult for them to engage in open and honest dialogue and be heard by others.

Secondly, educators who do not address conflicts between female students using strategies that confront underlying gender bias and indirect bullying are further reinforcing gender constructs and stereotypes, which Carlisle and Rofes (2007) argue, lead to lifelong trauma for many students. This is further outlined by Elliot and Shenton (1999) who concluded that majority of women who have been bullied at school feel the effects later in life by having low self-esteem and finding it difficult to make new friends.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of the present study point specifically to several recommendations for Ministries of Education, school administrators, and teachers.

Three recommendations will be outlined below:

1. It is important that teachers engage in professional development regarding gender equity and gender bias. Professional development and training on these issues should be
compulsory if educators are to fully understand the root causes and embedded biases associated with conflict and aggression between female students. Further training would give teachers the tools necessary to recognize gender norms and stereotypes being enacted in conflicts, preparing them to choose appropriate resolution strategies to challenge and disrupt constructs of femininity.

2. The school-wide use of collaborative problem solving (CPS) is encouraged and implemented. School administrators should promote collaborative problem solving as a way to foster a positive school culture that values student voice and collaboration. Teachers should be given the opportunity to attend trainings that demonstrate how to effectively use CPS in the classroom and whole school community. It is recommended that CPS be a part of the pre-service training program for new teachers as well as the Principals Qualifications Programs for new administrators.

3. In combination with collaborative problem solving, teachers should be encouraged to use support and friendship groups to bring female students together. Teachers need to foster positive relationships between female students, providing an informal space for students to have discussion, connect and develop a rapport is of the utmost importance if relationships are to be built and maintained. Furthermore, providing an opportunity for female students to discuss their ideas and opinions encourages them to use their voice and be assertive, resulting in feelings of empowerment and confidence.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Inasmuch as the present study has served to expand upon the extant literature, it has also highlighted the need for further study. In future research endeavours, it is recommended that a greater emphasis be placed upon how social construction of gender plays a role in not only how
girls show aggression during conflict, but also how they respond to certain resolution strategies. Further exploration into the role race and class play in conflict triggers, displays of aggression as well as conflict resolution strategies need to be taken into account if we are to address these issues equitably.

Furthermore, teachers from all races, classes, ethnicities and genders who are engaging in this work need to be represented in further research findings. It is beneficial to examine teachers’ identities in relation to student identity when addressing conflict because it is easier to recognize biases, assumptions and misinterpretations that may affect the way a conflict is resolved. This research could further develop by investigating and highlighting the sensitivity that should be taken around resolving conflicts between female students with differing backgrounds and identities, and how as a teacher, one’s own identity plays a role in addressing conflict.

5.5 Conclusion

The present study is important because it highlights the significance of recognizing, acknowledging and addressing the social construction of gender roles and the ways in which female students ascribe to and enact those prescribed norms through conflict. The participants in the study shone a light on their experiences with conflict triggers being associated with insecurity about appearance and low self-esteem. They also spoke to the ways in which female students addressed these conflicts through relational and covert aggression. Finally, they acknowledged the fact that girls need to learn how to be assertive through collaborative problem solving strategies and support groups. The findings in this study are helpful to teachers and school communities because they recognize the gender inequities that are prevalent within the school system and society as a whole but work to present practical strategies that challenge the
dominant understanding of femininity. The data reflects the literature surrounding this topic and emphasizes that providing space and opportunity for girls to use their voices and make connections with one another teaches them about the importance of support and unity. To conclude, the present study acknowledges the power of relationships between girls. It serves as a reminder that teaching girls the skills to think critically about the social construction of femininity leads to a deeper understanding of self. It is through this awareness that girls learn the invaluable lesson that when they support each other, they light the path towards female empowerment and gender equity for generations to come.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: April 7, 2016
Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a female student in a pre-service teaching program, I am interested in learning how a sample of female teachers are experiencing and responding to conflict among groups of girls in schools. Findings obtained from this study may be informative for not only current and pre-service teachers, but equity policy-makers, and leaders in the promotion of gender equity within the educational community. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My Research Coordinator who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. To address any discomfort or vulnerability with the topic of conflict, bullying and or/gender equity you will be provided with the questions ahead of time. There are no other known risks to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy. Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,
Laura Fraser
Research Coordinator’s Name:
Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic

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 and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________ (name of researcher) 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 my research study. The aim of this research is to learn how a sample of female teachers are experiencing and responding to conflict between female students in schools. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 19 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into 4 sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their encounters with bullying between female students, then their experiences and beliefs related to what conflict resolution strategies they have used when dealing with conflict between female students, and concluding with questions regarding supports and next steps for teachers who wish to empower their female students to empower and support each other.

I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A - Background Information

1. How long have you been working as a teacher in Ontario?
2. What grade/s do you currently teach?
3. What other grades have you taught over the course of your career?
4. Do you practice any other roles besides being a teacher in your school? (i.e. coach, resource teacher)
5. Can you describe the community in which your school is located (prominent cultures, socioeconomic status)?
6. How long have you taught at this school?
7. What made you want to become a teacher?
8. Have you ever considered teaching from a feminist perspective?
9. Do you discuss gender equity in your classroom?

Section B – Encounters with Bullying Between Female Students

10. Do you see girls typically forming same sex friendship groups?
11. Can you describe an experience you’ve had when female students were in conflict with one another?
12. In your experience, how have female students shown aggression towards one another (physical, verbal)?
13. How do female students usually respond to conflict?
14. What are some root causes or triggers that initiate conflict between girls? What do you think is the most common?
15. Do conflicts between girls affect their academic achievements?
16. What does relational aggression mean to you?

Section C – Conflict Resolution Strategies Used

17. What are some strategies you have used to resolve conflict between female students?
18. Do you use different conflict resolution strategies when dealing with boys than you do when dealing with girls?
19. In your experience, have girls responded positively to the conflict resolution strategies you have used?

Section D – Supports and Next Steps

20. As a teacher, do you think it is possible to use conflict resolution strategies as a means to teach female students about supporting each other? If so, how?
21. What strategies do you use to teach female students about the importance of building each other up and empowering one another?
22. What advice would you give to new teachers who want to use conflict resolution strategies that promote gender equity among female students?

Thank you for your time and responses.