

AN URBAN DISTRICT'S MIDDLE SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE IMPACT  
OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A CASE STUDY

by

Billy Carl Thompson, Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2019

AN URBAN DISTRICT'S MIDDLE SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE IMPACT  
OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A CASE STUDY

by Billy Carl Thompson, Jr.

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2019

APPROVED BY:

Jose A. Puga, Ed. D., Committee Chair

Jared Bigham, Ed. D., Committee Member

John Price, Ph. D., Committee Member

James A. Swezey, Ed. D., Research Consultant

## ABSTRACT

The proposed study is a qualitative design that utilizes a collective case approach. The purpose of this study is to examine administrator response to the academic and social impact that relational aggression has on girls between sixth through eighth grade at Thorn Rose Public Schools. The participants in this study are administrators from the district with diverse racial, gender identity, and ethnic backgrounds. The theories that guide this study are Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) founded in the work of Jean Miller, M.D., and Erikson's Stages of Psychological Development. The (RCT) theory assumes that humans have a natural drive toward acceptance and relationship building (Miller & Stiver, 1997). According to Erikson's theory, every person must pass through a series of eight interrelated stages over the human life cycle (Erikson, 1993). This research focuses on Erikson's fifth stage, known as adolescence, a time when academic achievement and social standing had the potential for significant impact. The researcher sought to examine the academic and social impact of aggression and the administrators' response. Data collection was done through campus observation, a focus group, and a semi-structured interview protocol. The findings of this study included six themes: skillset deficiencies, characteristics of aggression, climate impact, esteem, education, attempted solutions. The participants grappled with their own ability to address the impact of relational aggression. They expressed being inadequately prepared and were at times overwhelmed.

*Keywords:* Adolescent, Relational Aggression, Bullying, Self-esteem, Perception, Relational-Cultural Theory

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Dedication.....	9
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	10
Overview.....	10
Background.....	11
Situation to Self.....	15
Problem Statement.....	16
Purpose Statement .....	17
Significance of the Study.....	17
Research Questions.....	20
Definitions.....	21
Summary.....	23
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	25
Overview.....	25
Theoretical Framework.....	27
Erikson’s Stages of Development.....	28
The Rationale for Erikson’s Theory.....	30
Related Literature.....	31
A Brief History of the Female Bullying Phenomenon.....	32
The Evolving Definition of Bullying.....	33
Adolescent Aggression.....	35
Cyber Bullying.....	37

Gender Difference in Bullying.....	38
Comparison Between Male and Female.....	38
Traditional Bullying vs. Relational Bullying.....	40
Contributing Social Factors that Impact Bullied Adolescents.....	41
Students and Self-esteem .....	41
Students and Self-worth.....	42
The Role of Body Image and Relating to Others.....	43
Family and School.....	43
The Role of Family.....	44
The Role of Peers.....	45
The Role of Middle School Educators .....	45
The Role of Bullying Perception .....	46
The Academic Impact of Relational Aggression.....	47
The Role of Sports .....	48
The Role of the Environment .....	49
The Role of the Middle School Transition .....	50
The Role of the Middle School Administrator .....	51
Gaps in Literature.....	59
Summary.....	59
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....</b>	<b>62</b>
Overview.....	62
Design.....	62
Research Questions.....	64

Setting.....	64
Participants.....	65
Procedures.....	66
The Researcher's Role.....	67
Data Collection.....	69
Semi-structured Interview.....	71
Campus Observation with Field Notes.....	74
Focus Group.....	76
Data Analysis .....	80
Trustworthiness.....	85
Credibility.....	86
Dependability and Confirmability.....	87
Transferability .....	88
Ethical Considerations.....	88
Summary.....	90
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	91
Overview.....	91
Participants.....	92
Alan.....	92
Barbra.....	93
Grace.....	94
Debra.....	95
Harold.....	97

Vanessa.....	98
Zachary.....	99
Elaine.....	100
Velma.....	101
Daisy.....	102
Results .....	104
Skillset Deficiencies.....	105
Characteristics of Relational Aggression.....	106
Climate Impact.....	107
Esteem.....	110
Lack of Education.....	111
Attempted Solutions.....	112
Research Question Responses.....	114
Summary.....	119
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	122
Overview.....	122
Summary of Findings.....	122
Discussion.....	124
Theoretical Findings.....	124
Empirical Findings.....	125
Implications.....	126
Theoretical.....	127
Empirical.....	128

Practical.....129

Delimitations and Limitations.....130

Recommendations for Future Research.....131

Summary.....132

REFERENCES.....135

APPENDICES.....151

    APPENDIX A: CONSENT FOR RESEARCH .....151

    APPENDIX B: FIELD OBSERVATION NOTES.....155

    APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....156

    APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION.....157

    APPENDIX E: Recruitment Email.....158

    APPENDIX F: Telephone Script.....159

    APPENDIX G: IRB Approval Letter.....156

    APPENDIX H: Code Matrix.....161

    APPENDIX I: Participants.....162

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my Heavenly Father, the source of all blessings. Without Him nothing is possible and with Him all things are possible. It was while attending church as a youth that I first heard someone introduced as Doctor. I don't know why, but I leaned over and told my grandmother, "one day I will be called doctor."

I stand on the shoulders of many who have gone before me. Most men in my generational line have very little formal education, but they have lots of wisdom and common sense which has made successful in their own way. My grandfather taking me to work with him as a child encouraged me to finish school seeing that I was not made for manual labor.

I am grateful to my aunt Carol who pushed me to my highest level by letting me know that I did not have an option. She didn't ask me if I wanted to go to college. She asked, "where are you going to go to college? She was the first to graduate with a college degree and opened the door for me to follow.

I am grateful to my parents who gave me the best they. They didn't have money, but they gave me encouragement and let me know that I had options that they did not and that I should take advantage of them. Last, but not least, I am grateful to my beautiful wife Joy. She has supported me allowing me to take a year off work. She held down the bills, while I did my research. She is truly a help mate.

There are countless people that inspired me, encouraged me, and contributed to me getting to this point. I am thankful for them all. Especially to all my teachers and professors who taught me to be a lifelong learner.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Relational aggression as a topic becomes a theme of movies, television shows, and books. Popular books such as *Queen Bees & Wanna Bees*, *Odd Girl Out*, *Drama*, *Rumors & Secrets*, and popular movies such as *Mean Girls*, *Bring It On*, and *Clueless* have brought much attention to this subject. Relational aggression, a form of female bullying, has also been the topic of much scholarly research, discussed in detail in the following chapter.

According to Juvonen and Graham (2014), bullying is defined as aggressive behavior that involves a perceived or real power imbalance. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2011), bullying results in serious antisocial behavior among teens and can hinder healthy relationship development.

Adolescence is a time for students to transition from elementary school to middle school. According to Erikson (1993), adolescence is a time when students begin to develop their sense of social belonging. Generally, girls' value social relationships differently from boys; thus, they are deeply hurt when it turns into conflict (Coyne et al., 2006). The impact has not been determined what bullying has on the academic and social lives of female students, but according to Juvonen and Graham (2014), relational aggression correlates with adjustment issues, higher rates of delinquency, and increased cases of school dropouts. Therefore, according to Juvonen and Graham (2014), relationships formed during this stage of development have a significant impact on students both socially and academically. This research explored the impact of bullying on academic and social life.

## **Background**

At Thorn Rose Public Schools (pseudonym), teenage bullying had become a significant problem worthy of study, due to the increased incidents reported using better tracking methods (Gardenhire, 2013). This study is not only significant for this campus but also for the country as research indicates this phenomenon's impact on adolescents is universal (Twemlow & Sacco, 2013; Heinemann, 1972). The National Child Health and Human Development conducted a survey entitled Health Behavior of School-aged Children (HBSC). This 1998 large-scale study on bullying found that teens between grades six and ten were involved in bullying-related activities. The study noted that 30% of the 15,686 students surveyed had reported involvement of some kind in bullying incidents, either as an aggressor, a victim, or as both a victim and an aggressor (Nansel, R. N., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P., 2001).

A 1993 survey funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) also indicated that approximately 20% of students reported being bullied at some time during their school career. The American Medical Association's Council on Scientific Affairs concluded that 7% to 15% of all teenagers engaged in bullying behaviors (Pedersen and Seidman, 2004). Snyder, DeBrey, and Dillow (2016) noted that one in every four students in the United States experienced bullying. Such statistics indicated that bullying was a problem in the American school system. According to the World Health Organization, the United States had a high rate of school bullying compared with other countries (Craig & Harel, 2004).

Stuart-Cassel V, Bell A, Springer F. (2011) noted that bullying became a more recognized issue in northern Oklahoma, causing the Legislature to create House Bills 2287 and 2215 and Senate Bill 1941 to address the issue. Thorn Rose Middle Schools had increased its

awareness program by setting up an anonymous online platform to report the increased incidents of female bullying. The reported rise in bullying that occurred at Thorn Rose provoked a response from this researcher (Gardenhire, 2013). Bullying among school-aged students continues to be a problem of epidemic proportions in the United States. Handling bullying in schools is a complex challenge impacting not only students, but also parents, teachers, and administrators (Louis et al. 2010).

According to Crick and Grotpeter (1995), many teachers and administrators ignored bullying, passed it off as an acceptable part of growing up or dismissed it altogether as another instance of girls being girls. An example of such overlooked relationally aggressive behaviors would be female students who shoved one another, gossiped, or name-calling. It was apparent that female bullying had become as common as male bullying. The misconception that only boys can bully is incorrect since girls can also be ruthless when it comes to non-physical bullying (Boyer, 2010). The 2016 Annual Bullying Statistics in the UK showed that girls had been spearheading an electronic form of bullying known as cyber-bullying for quite some time.

Teachers and administrators who continue to ignore bullying tend to hold antiquated views on the problem and are not aware of the criminal aspects of bullying (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Kaltiala-Heino, R., Rimplela, M., Rantanen, P., and Rimpela, A. (2000), explored the relationship between bullying and criminality, finding that 60 percent of students who bullied in middle school and high school had been convicted of one or more crimes before the age of 25. Bullying can become criminal when it becomes physical assault, harassment based on gender or race, violent threats, death threats, obscene and harassing phone calls and texts, sexting, sexual exploitation, child pornography, stalking, and extortion. Under Oklahoma House Bill 2287, such behaviors are deemed criminal (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). The Department

of Education (2011) study found that 96% of adults failed to recognize bullying among adolescents in school. This study noted that bullying happened in under-supervised areas; such as the playground, locker rooms, bus stops, and hallways.

Amundson (1991) noted that some educators feared that if they punished bullies, the intimidation would be driven underground and intensify, thus empowering the bullies to engage in their attacks. However, with incidences of bullying now impacting almost one-third of the student body, the nation's parents, teachers, and administrators are aware that serious problems exist within their schools (Li, 2006). These problems consist of things such as cyber-bullying, gay-bashing, physical and non-physical aggression, and social isolation (Pedersen and Seidman, 2004). According to Amundson (1991), there has been a paradigm shift in the response of the educational community toward bullying. Not only was bullying less tolerated, but educators were also aware of the deeper societal issues that fostered the persistence of bullying in schools such as home life and peer relationships. One of the most significant aspects was that intimidation was not limited to just one-on-one bullying but had a wider impact on social interactions such as a group of students attacking an individual or another group (Amundson, 1991). The shift in attention to group interactions brought into focus the enabling role of the bully's unsolicited support group, which was composed of passive bystanders, both student, and school personnel. Bystanders, whether they were students or adults, were less likely to assist victims of bullying as the former tended to be passive in their response (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012).

The attention given to bullying in the media has heightened awareness, such as news articles on teenage suicide due to relational bullying. Dean (2012) wrote one such article about Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old girl who committed suicide after repeated issues with relational

aggression. Before her death, Amanda made a video describing her bullying situation, which received over nine million views (substantially increasing the number of passive bystanders).

Relational aggressive behaviors made researchers more aware that bullying took multiple forms in addition to physical contact. Since the beginning of bullying research in the early 1970s, researchers were interested in both peer relationships and aggressive behaviors (Berger, 2007). Bullying between females can be socially indirect, including spreading malicious rumors, restricting peers from group activities, practicing social exclusion, and harassing individuals. According to Mason (2008), this type of intimidation can also be psychological, through insults, name-calling, or other non-physical behaviors over a prolonged period.

Females especially have been found to engage in this less direct form of bullying called relational aggression (Pedersen and Seidman, 2004). The advent of technology has enhanced the dynamics of relational aggression through cyber-bullying. Through this form of communication, bullying can now occur instantaneously, anonymously, and in the sanctuary of the victim's bedroom without parents or school personnel ever being aware (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). These behaviors can be perpetuated through cyber communications, verbally, non-verbally, emotionally, socially, directly, or indirectly (Amundson, 1991).

An increase in incidences of bullying students based on sexual orientation, supported by negative attitudes about gay and lesbian students, expands the scope of relational aggression. Henkin (2012) says that adolescents who become frequent targets of this kind of behavior may be impacted socially, psychologically, or academically. This aggressive female model of bullying, according to Wiseman (2002) consists of an individual female or a group of females weaponizing their relationships. In contrast to traditional physical bullying, victims of relational

aggression are harmed psychologically; results being both salient and aversive to victims (Blakely-McClure, S. J., & Ostrov, 2016).

### **Situation to Self**

As a former elementary school teacher and as a current secondary school administrator, this study bore relevance and interest to me. Many of my female students at the elementary level had already begun showing signs of relationally aggressive bullying behaviors, though not as progressive as my middle school students had. As an administrator, I saw many students sent to the office for bullying. Though this study was not conducted in a district where I was currently an administrator, I chose this district to explore and better understand the academic and social impact of relational aggression on an age group with which I was familiar.

As a former teacher, I found it disheartening to conceive of my former "innocent" elementary students being capable of such behaviors once they were of middle-school age. When they were in my class, they were sweet. Yes, they had disagreements, but the aggression was easily solved with an apology. However, when they became adolescents, the rules of engagement changed. I noticed through our school's discipline log system an increase in the number of office referrals for incidents of female bullying behaviors. It is vital for other administrators and me to determine the core reasons behind the rising phenomenon of female bullying behavior in our schools and its ultimate impact on the students themselves.

I personally heard girls as early as the third grade who isolated their peers out of their social group by the phrase, "Do not be friends with her!" This behavior of relational aggression took up a bulk of my time as a secondary school administrator. I felt that it was important to address this issue, as it impacted daily the students that I sought to serve.

## **Problem Statement**

Relational aggression is a growing phenomenon among middle school-aged students (Rivera-Maestre, 2010). Within the transition to middle school, children begin to break from their parents, naturally. Girls begin rejecting their parents and turning toward adolescent female relationships instead. However, according to Brady and Conn, (2006), these relationships often found them experiencing the very cruelty from which their parents desired to shield them. Some of these negative relationships were minor in their impact, yet in extreme cases, deadly consequences had occurred (such as the case of Amanda Todd), which made minimizing such activity on the nation's middle school campuses an imperative (Brady & Conn, 2006).

Adolescent students have not always benefited from the academic and social aspects of the school. Initial failures to meet these needs were, in part, what led to the national middle school movement (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). The movement sought to meet the social and academic developmental needs of students by focusing on students' holistic needs as opposed to just the curriculum. Due to significant incidents of female bullying in middle school, exploring the impact it had on this population was vital (Brady & Conn, 2006).

Incidents of relational aggression and bullying in America's middle schools were increasingly reported (Nansel et al., 2001). The literature acknowledged that relational aggression was a form of bullying unique to females that were often characterized by cyber-bullying and social isolation (Cappella & Weinstein, 2008).

Upon review of the data, no studies were discovered that defined or specifically pointed out the academic and social impact of relational aggression as perceived within the context of the lived experiences of middle school administrators. This study contributed to the scholarly

dialogue by examining the lived experiences that middle school administrators had; it considered the academic and social impact of relational aggression at Thorn Rose Public Schools.

### **Purpose Statement**

The goal of this collective case study was to explore the responses of 10 middle school administrators on the social and academic impact of relational aggression on their middle school campus. By understanding this experience, administrators can address the impact of these issues on their campuses more efficiently. Two theories underpinned the study. The first focused on the age of adolescents, which was based on Erikson's theory of development (Erikson, 1993). The second was on how females interact, which is based on Miller's RCT theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997). An effort was made to contribute to the body of research to more effectively assist future administrators as well as other education stakeholders in understanding the academic and social impact of relational aggression. There was a critical evaluation of the existing psychological and educational literature, concerning early adolescent female self-esteem, that supported the understanding of the central role of educators in handling this phenomenon (Ferkany, 2008).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study sought to contribute significantly to existing theories and research on bullying. Research carried out in Auckland found that 85% of adolescents had been subjected to bullying (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). This study sought to shed light on this horrific problem, its contributing factors, and the administrators' response. Studies reviewed on this topic explained the different types of bullying but had not sought to understand the various contributing causes or response of school administration. The purpose of this research was to identify the role

society played in bullying among adolescents, contributing causes, and the school leaderships' response to relational aggression.

This research tried to understand the complexities of the female bullying phenomenon. This study analyzed the lived contexts of the administrators who dealt with bullying and their perspectives and responses to this behavior. According to Juvonen and Graham (2014), violence can be one of the infirmities of education. For this reason, this research is important in understanding the interpersonal relationship between girls and their education.

There is no decline in the trend of incidents of female bullying in the nation's schools; rather Boschert (2008) asserts that bullying among youth is increasing. This study explored the impact on Thorn Rose's middle schools students as they dealt with the issue of relational aggression. It sought to present the administrators' perspectives of the current bullying crisis among their students in the Thorn Rose public schools' setting. Vital information can be ascertained from studying an individual administrator's experience, providing collective understanding to middle school educators in addressing this issue.

The proposed study identified underlying issues that made an individual either a victim or a bully. Also, it sought to create understanding, namely by analyzing and reviewing the bullying behaviors and their impact on students. Fredricks et al., (2011), in a study by the National Center for School Engagement, showed that adolescent girls were equally involved in bullying when compared to boys. This study analyzed the reasons for the vulnerability of girls to bullying. This research benefits educators because it investigated the academic and social issues surrounding female-on-female bullying.

Relational aggression was an indirect form of female bullying. This form of bullying was as prevalent among female students as traditional physical bullying was among male students

(Bjorkvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukianinen, 1992). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) stated that while males were prone to inflict physical pain, females were just as aggressive in their readiness to inflict emotional pain. Males were historically thought to be the more aggressive of the genders. They noted that females could be equally as mean as males, though they used a different form of aggression.

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) suggested that females were more apt to go after something the victim valued, such as a personal item or a relationship, rather than directly attack their victim physically. This indirect bullying type of behavior had a potential impact on academic progress, according to (Gruber & Fineran, 2016). He noted that bullying had the potential to interfere with achievement and slow social development, as students who were bullied, began to avoid academic and extracurricular activities. Thus, students' grades began to suffer as they become withdrawn from family and friends.

Gibson (2003) stated that relational aggression and its impact did not share the same level of recognition and preparation among educators, as did physical bullying. He gave two possible reasons why school personnel were more inclined to respond to physical aggression over indirect, relational aggression. The first reason he gave was that school personnel were primarily trained to keep children physically safe. Bosworth et al. (2011) agreed, noting that though there were some, yet too few exercises that kept students emotionally safe. Some schools had adopted moral or character education programs to address this issue. However, fire and safety drills were practiced regularly at all schools to ensure the physical safety of students. Second, Gibson (2003) concluded that due to lack of training, school personnel lacked in their perception of the significance of the social, psychological, and academic impacts that indirectly impacted students who were bullied. This study seeks to determine what administrators need to address the issue.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this collective case study was to understand the perspectives of 10 middle school administrators on the impact of relational aggression. Qualitative research studies focused on the exploration of a central phenomenon or trend, which began with a central research question that defined the overarching objective of the study (Creswell, 2013). This qualitative case study focused on the social and academic impact of relational aggression on Thorn Rose from 10 administrators' perceptions. Three research questions were utilized to guide the study.

The central research question that guided this collective case study was (RQ1): How do middle school administrators describe relational aggression (female bullying)? This question sought to identify the perspectives of middle school administrators and their understanding of the phenomenon on their campuses. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) say that administrators should not confound relational aggression with other forms of aggression. Especially traditional bullying, which was generally associated with males. It investigated why females were as involved in bullying as their male counterparts. It also sought to identify factors that made some girls susceptible to bullying.

The second research question emphasized the results that this phenomenon had in middle schools. This question was (RQ2): How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied? This research question investigated how bullying impacted the various aspects of female student life. It showed how bullying impacted behavior and the long-term results of bullying on an individual. Juvonen and Graham (2014) said that victims of bullying display numerous adjustment problems, including social and

academic difficulties. However, it was not clear whether bullying experiences cause these adjustment problems or whether signs of maladjustment made victims more vulnerable.

This research question was chosen for this study because the current literature did not take into consideration the impact of this experience. Gruber and Fineran (2016) said it would be beneficial for administrators to be knowledgeable about which types of bullying or harassment experiences had an aversive impact on the well-being of the adolescents they served.

The third research question was (RQ3): How does a middle school administrators' perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response? Gruber and Fineran (2016) found that bullying created issues of mistrust among and toward female students. This study investigated the difficulties the victims of bullying faced as they went on with their lives. These research questions could be a wake-up call for policymakers to realize the gravity of the bullying problem in schools.

### **Definitions**

1. *Adolescents* are individuals in their teenage years who are going through social changes in their lives, with parents and peers as a natural function of school structure and pubertal status (Simmons & Blyth, 2009). The fifth stage in Erikson's stages of development is adolescence, which is when the child struggles with identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1993).
2. *Relational aggression* is an act that harms others through damaged relationships. This form of aggression impacts friendships, feelings of acceptance, and group inclusion. Relational aggression manipulates people or makes them feel excluded from a group (White & Turner, 2014).

3. *Bullying* is a behavior that repeatedly exposes a child to unprovoked negative actions by a peer. It must be intentional, repeated, and imbalanced (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Bullying is an aggressive and unwanted behavior among schoolchildren that involves perceived or real power imbalance. The victims of such practices may develop severe and lasting problems.
4. *Self-esteem* is one's self-evaluative view. It is a positive or negative orientation toward oneself. Rosenberg defines self-esteem as the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings concerning Self as an object." Juvonen and Graham (2014) suggest that a bullied person tends to have lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression.
5. *The relational-cultural theory* is a concept that proposes that people develop culturally within the context of their relationships (Davis, Harris, & Berry Edwards, 2016). According to the theory, the goal of development is to foster well-being among the pupils, rather than form a separate and independent self. The argument downplays bullying by emphasizing the centrality and importance of connection and mutuality among people.
6. *Gay-bashing* is the physical or verbal abuse against an individual perceived by the aggressor as lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual. Stotzer (2015) asserts that gay-bashing threatens one purely because they are gay or thought to be gay. Statistics indicate that nine in every ten gay people are victims of gay-bashing.
7. *Social isolation* is the state of complete lack of connection with an individual or society. According to McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006), social isolation is prevalent among students who are perceived differently due to their race,

- physical appearance, gender identity, disability, or religious beliefs. Millions of children are suffering from social isolation in the United States with no support.
8. *Cyber-bullying* is the type of bullying that takes place using electronic technology. Such devices as phones, computers, and tablets are used in this practice. Examples of cyber-bullying include cyber-bullying text messaging and rumors sent via emails or social sites. According to Smith et al. (1999), cyber-bullying is mostly anonymous, which makes it even worse. It has a wider audience and spreads quickly.

### **Summary**

This study focused on understanding the academic and social impact of relational aggression on middle school adolescent females. The insight was provided through a methodology that explored the perspective of administrators from a northern Oklahoma district. Through semi-structured interviews, observation, and focus group, common themes, documented experiences, coding, and meanings interpreted, provided an understanding of this phenomenon. Thus, the study led to a comprehension of the impact of relational aggression on students with the hope of helping administrators work more efficiently in serving this population and bring knowledge to the forefront of the psychological, emotional, academic, and physiological impact on middle school girls who were bullied. The examination consisted of a collective case study of 10 administrators. These respondents shared their experiences for an understanding of the social and academic impact of female bullying. The collection of data was through semi-structured interviews, observation, and a focus group. I analyzed the data through within-case and across-case collective analyses. The study utilized qualitative research approaches that were flexible when dealing with the respondents. The methodologies enabled me to have a thorough understanding of the topic while providing a systematic and in-depth evaluation of the bullying

problem. The study sought to discover strategies that could reduce the negative impact of bullying in American middle schools.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

This section gives a thorough review of the literature that addresses relational aggression. However, due to the many gaps in the literature on this issue, the review also examines the impact that school, family, peers, sports, and environment have on female bullying. Many studies in relational aggression were conducted within the last 20 years. Most of the review in this section addressed aggression among girls, but with the controversy about who is the more aggressive, it also features instances of aggression in boys. Moreover, with the increase in the use of technology among adolescents, this section includes a look at cyber-bullying. This literature review includes the contributing factors and potentially adverse consequences of relational aggression.

Relational aggression is a phenomenon that many middle school educators are challenged with addressing on their campuses. According to Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, and Scheidt (2001), this type of female bullying is more prevalent among sixth through eighth graders than those in higher or lower grades. Middle school educators are tasked today with many responsibilities. Among the most important of these responsibilities are protecting their students psychologically, emotionally, academically, and physically.

Relational aggression is one of the challenges girls face in their transition to middle school. According to (Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2011) Girls use relational aggression for both personal gain and retaliation. It is important to analyze relational aggression among girls because it seems to impact them differently than it does boys. Girls engage in relational aggression for many reasons that range from reactive to proactive aggression.

An inherent developmental challenge is one of the reasons middle schools were initially created; to aid in both the psychological and academic transition that comes with adolescence. Adolescents are in a transition. At this age, 13-19, students typically are beginning to experience change. The change comes in the form of academic rigor from their teachers, change in social-behavioral pressures from peers, physiological changes in their bodies, psychological distress in relationships, and a decrease or increase in academic motivation. These changes come at a time when their overall life tends to be becoming more rigorous. The microsystem of the middle school, consisting of an individual social group, has a direct impact on an adolescent's experiences and development in middle school. The literature also viewed bullying through various systems such as family, school, and other proximal structures having a direct impact on student behavior.

Mishna (2004) argues that aggression among girls is a vice that is best understood within a community context. This type of bullying seldom occurs in isolation and usually has a witness, some of which include family, friends, and bystanders. Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledges that the quantity and quality of connections in environmental settings also have significant influences on development, and many researchers have noted the correlation between environmental elements and behavior. Therefore, development either can be encouraged or discouraged by these factors. An awareness of the influences of relational aggression is vital when trying to understand how people respond to it. Female bullying goes beyond the victimizer and victim to include the community around them. Consequently, Gomes (2007) wrote that studies about aggression among girls should be grounded in a framework of community influences. This study used a similar context to come up with relevant recommendations.

## Theoretical Framework

The first theory that guided this study was Erikson's development theory. The theory is a psychoanalytic theory of psychosocial development that has eight different stages from infancy to adulthood. Every stage has challenges that may have either a positive or negative outcome in personality development. Erikson's theory emphasizes the impact that culture, society, and conflict have on "self." According to Erikson, there is room for continuous growth and development. He emphasizes that the adolescent stage is a stage where personal identity occurs.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that an individual develops within multiple contexts. Each context has the potential to independently or interdependently influence how this development occurs. If an adolescent struggle in their identity formation, he or she may experience self-doubt, role diffusion, or role confusion. As a result, these adolescents may not regard what society thinks about their actions or behaviors if they are viewed as negative. A crisis at this adolescent stage is due to the psychological needs of a person conflicting with the needs of society. This crisis must be resolved before reaching the next step in development. An adolescent must successfully learn and address the demand of each developmental stage for one to manage the subsequent stage. Notably, this study used the concepts of Erikson's developmental theory to understand this impact of this phenomenon.

Miller & Stiver, (1997) and their colleagues at the Stone Center at Wellesley College have devised a supporting developmental theory, which incorporates a gender-specific framework and differs from traditional developmental theories of separation and individualization. A core part of a female's sense of self is found in being-in-relationship both with herself and others (Amundson, 1991). As such, a girl's self-esteem is rooted in feeling that she is a part of relationships; and maintains those relationships (Maguen & Armistead, 2006).

According to Lawson (1991), the relationship between a school and its wider community influence one another, and female adolescents are impacted by these interactions.

Gilligan (2003) says that sex differences in aggression are usually interpreted by taking the male response as the norm so that aggression in females is identified as a problem requiring further explanation. This study is grounded on the assumption that society and relationships which are an intricate part of female student life; impact their behavior and could contribute to aggressive behaviors in school. Bey and Turner (1996) affirm this theory stating their belief that aggressive behaviors are learned responses to conditions and circumstances in one's socializing environments: home, community, and school.

### **Erikson's Stages of Development**

The primary theory used to frame this study is Erikson's stages of development. Erikson (1993) states that children between the ages of 13-19 go through a stage called adolescence. Adolescence occurs when teenagers start to explore and play multiple roles within society and begin to develop their identity. Erikson's theory characterized this phase as an identity versus identity confusion. During this period of the evolution of identity, adolescents find out who they are, identify the direction they want to take in their lives, determine their commitments, and establish their goals (Ashford, LeCroy, & Williams, 2018). Identity confusion occurs when an adolescent lacks direction and is unprepared for adulthood. Ashford et al. (2018) state that identity in adolescence is a significant developmental task.

Erikson's developmental theory is chosen as a framework for this study because it addresses the stage of development that female teens are in during their middle school years. One of the areas that adolescents struggle with is their identity. While these adolescents are

being bullied, they struggle with their identity, and where they belong, with the added role of being a student.

Social acceptance adds to the confusion of being a female adolescent student. During this time of an adolescent's life, they are in the developmental stage of identity formation (Ashford et al., 2018). Some youth between the ages of 12 and 14 years old are just children themselves; therefore, they may have problems establishing their identity while trying to fit in with their peers. Erikson's developmental theory attempts to address this issue. Price-Mitchell (2010) cited Erikson's stages of development as part of their framework for their study. Erikson (1993) identifies that the core of the individual and the heart of culture surrounds the person. Price-Mitchell found in their study that the adolescent stage could impact a person later in life. Price-Mitchell states that when "ideology and values are confronted, affirmation by peers becomes important" (p.21).

Newman and Newman (2012) mentioned Erikson's psychosocial therapy as part of their book. According to these authors, the psychosocial theory has different stages of development; psychosocial crisis, central process of receiving the crisis, a radius of significant relationships, and coping (p.63). As found by Newman and Newman, if conflicts are resolved, there is a sense of mastery that emerges during this stage. The psychosocial theory reflects Erikson's (1993) theory of the entire lifespan being required for the psychosocial development to appear and become integrated into an individual's life (Newman & Newman, 2012, p. 65). Erikson presented and provided examples of how various cultures support a person's development at this time in their lives. Newman and Newman's work relates to this study population by classifying early adolescence (12 to 18) as the stage of development for the study's participants.

Hatcher (2011) used Erikson's (1993) stages for his study population. Even though Hatcher used males, he used the same age range as this study. Hatcher's research noted that adolescents tend to acquire part of their identity from their social group, which helps to solidify their answer to the identity question that evolves during adolescence (Hatcher, 2011, p.25). Hatcher also found that Erikson's speculation was correct that relationships were significant at specific stages of development and contributed to identity development (Hatcher, 2011, p.28). This study provides evidence that Erikson's psychosocial development theory is still relevant in today's research.

All the above studies referred to Erikson's development theory. Erikson (1993) created a theory that defines different stages of life in detail. Within this study, the researcher used Erikson's stages of development, paying attention to the role of "identity" during the stage of adolescence. The researcher selected this theory because it explores adolescence, the developmental stage of the population being studied and in part describes the phenomenon being studied.

### **The Rationale for Erikson's theory**

Though numerous developmental theories could be used for this research, the key theory of this study is Erikson's stages of development. During his study, Erikson describes development according to age and stage. In so doing, it is easy for the researcher to relate the stage of development to the population from this study.

Since Erikson's theory focuses on the distinct stages of human development that individuals go through, particularly the emphasis on the adolescent stage, it is an appropriate theory to use to frame this study within the context of the social and academic impact of bullying on middle school girls. While other researchers may have used different theories of human

development, learning theory, or social need to guide their studies, these considerations were not appropriate for this study. The emphasis is on where the middle school girls are in the human development cycle when they are facing this social and academic transition. These stages are an indication that an individual does not develop and grow in a vacuum but is connected to people in her environment, and these people have a strong influence on the individual's behavior. The environment around them highly impacts the behavior of middle school girls. Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004) support this idea by demonstrating that the influence of the family, the school, and the community are interrelated, and it is important to be aware of the levels of influence each aspect of the environment has on an individual's characteristics and her development.

Erikson's developmental theory illustrates different stages of life (Erikson, 1993). The key stage in Erikson's developmental theory that pertains directly to middle school girls includes *identity versus role confusion*, which occurs during adolescence. During this stage, adolescents are confronted with taking on more than one role. While trying to figure out their role, these adolescents must deal with peer pressure and self-image. This study uses Erikson's stages of development because Erikson's eight stages serve as a guide to chronological as well as cultural development (Ashford et al., 2018). For all these reasons, Erikson's theory frames the theoretical work of this study. The theory, thus, helps us understand different contexts that surround an adolescent that can influence adolescent development.

### **Related Literature**

This chapter is comprised of a literature review on the phenomenon of bullying in general, and specifically on relational aggression. The review was done by looking at the following: a brief history of relational aggression, the evolving definition of bullying, the gender difference in bullying, the role self-esteem plays among female adolescents as it relates to

bullying, and the contributing factors of relational aggression. The literature also explored the social and academic implications for those who are bullied.

### **A Brief History of the Female Bullying Phenomenon**

According to Banks (1997) in the early 1990s, Scandinavian countries began witnessing aggressive behavior among female students. Researchers in the United States began researching in this field after these, and other nations had intensified their research. It has been found that girls deploy relationally aggressive behaviors: such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and dirty looks. Henkin (2012) and Odgers and Moretti (2002) both argue that there is room for further research in the types of bullying among girls. Extensive research has increased in this field due to its link with violence among teens.

Relational aggression is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it merely a local one. It has become a national crisis, as well as a global epidemic. Bullying behavior is such a pervasive problem that has impacted 70% of all the students surveyed (Banks, 1997). According to Sarason (1996), for years, bullying behaviors have been ignored or viewed as a normal part of adolescent development, but these bullying behaviors have a significant long-term impact on both the perpetrators and the victims that can be carried into their adult relationships.

The literature on relational aggression is not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, or socio-economic background. Relational aggression is not something that can be ignored or seen as "other people's problem." This global phenomenon has an impact on local school climates. As noted by Juvonen and Graham (2014), many female students have either been impacted by bullying directly or indirectly. It is a leading cause of violence and academic difficulties among youth. Other consequences of aggression among girls include loss of social network, suicide,

school expulsion, troubled parent-child relationships, and among others' indulgence in drug abuse.

### **The Evolving Definition of Bullying**

This phenomenon has been researched for almost 40 years by various nations, such as Scandinavia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Each of these nations has its terminology for aggressive behaviors. The widest accepted definition comes from a Swedish author, Dan Olweus, in his book called *Aggression in Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*.

The Norwegian term "mobbing" used by Heinemann (1972) refers to a group that suddenly violates unsuspecting individuals. The incident is usually over as quickly as it starts, but the impact can be devastating. The Norwegian definition of mobbing is like the English meaning of the term, which is used when a group takes negative action against an individual. Olweus (1978) used this term at the beginning of his research, but later he extended the definition to include one-on-one attacks of strong children against weaker children. Olweus' earlier work did not recognize the concept that we have come to know today as indirect bullying. Indirect bullying was brought to light in Finland by the research of (Bjorkvist et al., 1992). They noted the differences between direct aggression as physical bullying and indirect aggression as social bullying.

The term bullying is familiar in all Scandinavian, German, and English-speaking countries. There are nuances of meaning behind this one term. The term *bullying* and other related words have been used to describe negative peer relationships with school-aged children. The term *teasing* is a milder form of playful aggression used for younger children. Also, the term *harassment* appears like *bullying* but tends to be used for the older adolescent or adult aggression rather than for children. This type of *bullying* usually manifests as sexual, gender, or

racial harassment. Another term is *abuse*, which is a form of aggression that is often regulated to a family context. The various types of abuse are child abuse, parental abuse, domestic abuse, physical abuse, emotional, abuse, and sexual abuse.

Bullying is a universal concept. However, there is not always an exact translation of the bullying terms. The Japanese term for bullying is *ijime*. Smith, Morita, Junger, Olweus, Catalano, and Slee, P. (1999) consider the word *ijime* to be slightly different from the English word bullying. This Japanese word for bullying has a less physical connotation and a greater emphasis on social manipulation, which is more characteristic of a female type of bullying known as relational aggression.

The Italian words for bullying are *prepotenza* and *violeenza*. According to Fonzi (1997), *prepotenza* and *violeenza* imply both physically and violently aggressive behavior. There is seldom an exact matching of terms across languages and cultures. The issue of comparing terms is essential to having an international conversation on this phenomenon. It is helpful to understand how the terms compare, differ, and to what extent that they compare and differ. Fonzi (1997) noted that the Italian term *bullismo* is very similar to the English word bullying. Many nations have their terminology for the concept of bullying. However, the English definition of the word "bullying" is worthy of being considered due to its widespread usage.

Webster's Dictionary defines bullying as the act of intimidating a weaker person to make them do something. Though there is no unanimously agreed-upon definition of bullying, many articles on the topic of bullying have referred to the definition Olweus (1978) provided in his book, *Aggression in School*. He noted that bullying must occur consistently or over time. In other words, it must be a repeated behavior, not simply an isolated event. Also, there must be a perceived imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator. This imbalance of power

can be the result of a person's age, gender, or differences in the strength of their physicality. Though there is no widely agreed-upon definition, Arora (1996) agreed with Olweus when he stated that bullying involves a student repeatedly being exposed to unprovoked negative actions at the hand of his or her peers.

Bullying is not an activity that only occurs in school playgrounds. It can be seen in many places and take on various forms such as cyber, physical, or social-relational. Craig, Pepler, and Atlas (2000) said that bullying is a negative assertion of the imbalance of power through physical or socially aggressive behavior. Though the form of bullying may change over the years and into adulthood, the results are similar. By this definition, regardless of age or gender, bullying may manifest as playground bullying, cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, workplace harassment, gang activity, assault and battery, child abuse, spousal abuse, and elder abuse.

Bullying is the repeated aggressive act by an individual or group with the intent to cause harm to another. While Olweus' (1978) definition of bullying is commonly referenced in the bullying literature, there is room for expansion to define specific types of bullying. The challenge is whether students, as individuals or groups, view bullying behavior as intentional. Some students may view their bullying behavior as just teasing or kidding around versus intent to harm or cause damage to their peers.

Early adolescence, between the ages of 12 through 14, is a time of potential confusion about interpersonal relationships. It is also a time when mixed-gender connections begin to take on new meaning (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Pellegrini and Bartini (2001) note that students attempt to break the norms of same-gender interaction from their early childhood when boys would rather play with boys and girls with girls. Same-gender children often believe that the

opposite gender had a contagious disease called "cooties." During this stage, the genders did not touch each other.

There was a seismic shift starting in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, in how bullying was viewed. The media's attention turned particularly to aggressive behavior. It was during this time in Norway when the suicide of three young males was linked to severe bullying by their peers. The media attention from this event became a catalyst for subsequent intensive research in this area on a global scale (Olweus, 1978).

### **Adolescent Aggression**

Even though this phenomenon carries concerns that resonate with a global measure, the literature reviewed primarily in this study focus on the problem in America with middle school adolescents. The most common location for bullying behavior in general to occur appears to be in the middle school setting, among female students (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Bullying in schools is a widespread problem. Bullying touches the lives of most children at some time or another. A common source of bullying in schools is peer pressure and the formation of gangs. These gangs are more commonly associated with students with lower family incomes. Gangs become a surrogate family that thrives on bullying type behavior (Balter, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2016). Though bullying can occur with any age, researchers have shown that this problem is prevalent among school-aged teens. For many students, school is the primary context in which bullying occurs, because the school provides numerous opportunities to interact with peers.

Few other settings provide children with as much exposure to peers on as regular a basis as do schools. Thus, efforts to understand bullying must consider the role of classmates and school personnel, because they are the key socialization agents in this setting, creating either supportive or stressful context in which students' adaptive functioning unfold (Ladd,

Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Peer and adult awareness and level of involvement in bullying behaviors may have a significant influence on the extent of peer-directed aggression that occurs in the classroom setting (Henry, Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, VanAcker, & Eron, 2000).

Bullying is a notable problem with a meaningful and lasting impact. Researchers such as Hanish and Guerra (2004) have demonstrated that both bullies and their victims are at risk for experiencing a diverse set of short-term and long-term adjustment difficulties, including academic difficulties, emotional and behavioral problems, and disrupted social relationships. Bullying is an even more severe problem when it evolves to include such behaviors as weapon carrying, physical assaults, and sexual harassment.

Studies by Li and Bloom show that females bully just as much as males. A study conducted by Li (2006) of the bullying behaviors of 264 middle school students found that females were twice as likely to bully their peers as their male counterparts. They would use aggressive indirect tactics, such as cyber-bullying and social isolation. Bloom (2009) suggested that females are more likely to be victims of social adolescent aggressive bullying from other females. He also noted that female students are more apt to be bullied in middle school by their peers than at any other time in their educational career.

### **Cyber Bullying**

The technology boom has made many students have access to devices that connect to social media sites. Girls can send messages to their peers during the day or night using devices such as laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronic devices. As a result, many of them have become victims of bullying through these devices. Cyber-bullying has been highlighted in communities, schools, and the media. The advancement of technology has made this type of

aggression common among adolescents. Teenage girls have created a sub-world over the Internet that the adults have difficulty monitoring. Beale and Hall (2007) argue that cases of cyber-bullying are rampant among middle school peers. Girls engage more in cyber-bullying compared to their boy counterparts. Kowalski and Limber (2007) found that girls have higher incidences of being both the victim and the bully.

### **Gender Difference in Bullying**

Boys are more likely than girls to be involved in aggressive bullying behavior. This perception may be due to males' more frequent visible display of physical aggression. In contrast, girls rely more on subtle aggressive behaviors that are less visible and found to be more harmful to social relationships. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have suggested that overt aggression is displayed more frequently among boys, whereas relational aggression is more popular among girls. Though relational bullying can impact either gender, studies have shown that female peers more relationally victimize than males (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999).

### **Comparison Between Male and Female**

Most of the early research conducted by James and Owens (2004) on bullying was focused on males, as males were considered the most aggressive of the human species. Male students, value physical dominance, and their aggression more often manifest this way. However, females tend to value social dominance through relationships, and thus, their aggression manifests in a more passive-aggressive manner (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Brown (2003) agreed with Crick and Grotpeter that adolescent females are more likely to be indirect in their aggression than their male counterparts. Brown notes that it is boys who find themselves in the administrator's office for fighting more often than girls. Males have higher office referral and suspension rates. Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) note that female bullies have a different

character, and it is this indirect approach to bullying, which has allowed their behaviors to go largely undetected by parents and educators.

According to Zarzour (2000), females develop socially more rapidly than males and thus are more prone to socio-relational conflict. Either physical or social maturity becomes a strength that each gender can draw on in times of tension. The literature reviewed shows a difference in how males and females express aggressive behaviors. Girls are not necessarily less aggressive than boys; they express this aggression differently. Males tend to be direct, and females tend to be indirect. Indirect aggression is not as observable, so male aggression appears to be a more predominantly recognizable trait of bullying. Since the research indicates that adolescent females tend to be more indirect in their bullying, females are not as recognized observably as being bullies.

The research of Pellegrini and Bartini (2001) suggests that female bullying develops in adolescence when females become more relationally aware. They note an increase in bullying with female students, as they express the need to establish social status, as they transition from elementary school to middle school and into their new peer groups. There is a socio-emotional need for female students to have acceptance.

Brown (2003) believes male bullies are motivated by the need for dominance, power, or control and that bullies possess a great deal of natural physical hostility. However, this does not necessarily apply to the phenomenon of female bullies. Female bullies have different motivators. Bjorkvist et al., (1992) noted in their research that females tended to be manipulative and indirect in the expression of their aggression. They defined indirect aggression as the ability to inflict harm without detection or recourse.

### **Traditional Bullying vs. Relational Bullying**

Traditional bullying is repeated exposure to physical acts from one or more peers (Kowalski & Limber, 2007); whereas aggressive relational bullying ranges from minor incidents like verbal threats to major incidents like school shootings (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). The two forms of bullying can be either direct or indirect. Direct bullying can be either physical or verbal, but it is done in person, whereas with indirect bullying, the harm is inflicted on a person in the absence of the aggressor. For example, a bully may ask peers to ignore a person. If the peers comply, then this isolation is indirect, and the bully that is causing the harm may have had little to no contact with the victim. The harm inflicted is done indirectly.

No matter the preferred semantics, all definers seem to agree that these behaviors are covert and may involve social manipulation. Arnold Buss coined the term indirect aggression giving examples of throwing objects, breaking objects, slamming doors, and hurling verbal insults as illustrations of indirect aggressive behaviors (Osterman, 1999). This type of behavior is not necessarily categorized as being gender-specific, though it is more prevalent among adolescent females.

Aggressive behavior is a subcategory of traditional bullying behavior. It is often defined as negative acts intentionally carried out to cause relational harm to another. Any action that occurs accidentally is not considered aggressive behavior by this definition. By this definition, there also must be an imbalance of power, and the victim must find it difficult to defend himself or herself, and these acts must happen frequently. Two people with equal amounts of strength having an isolated altercation are not considered an incident of intimidation, nor is it considered bullying when the incident in question consists of friendly forms of teasing. Teasing is an ambiguous behavior that when friendly, does not intend to cause harm, whereas, in mean-spirited

teasing, there is an intent to cause harm. Once again, the imbalance of power and repetition clarifies the difference between acts that may be considered bullying from those that are not.

### **Contributing Social Factors that Impact Bullied Adolescents**

It is not entirely within the middle school educators' control of how adolescents view themselves, but educators are crucial in establishing campus culture. Educators should be aware of the contributing role of students' self-esteem. Hodges and Perry (1999) conducted a study of adolescents over a one-year interval. They found that students who appeared to have a physical disability or weakness, experienced peer rejections, and internalized their problems contributed to later victimization. These factors contribute to lower self-esteem, which is a major contributor to how victims perceive themselves and how bullies perceive their victims.

### **Students and Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem diminishes with age with as little as 2% of college students reporting high levels of self-esteem, over 20% of pre-adolescence (Amundson, 1991). Students who entered school expecting to be successful were not particularly concerned about academic achievement outcomes (Stipek & MacIver, 1989). Over time, these students were taught to care more about the external evaluation of their performance than the internal assessment of their effort. In this way, both academically and socially, students' self-esteem is impacted by constant evaluations from family, peers, and educators. Thus, adolescents feel the need to evaluate and re-evaluate their knowledge, skills, performance level, social status, and physicality in comparison to their peers.

## **Students and Self-worth**

According to Covington's (1984) theory of self-worth, there is a tendency to equate accomplishment with value, which creates a perception that individuals are only as good as their achievement, which many teachers often stress subconsciously. According to Nelson (1984) to the extent that teachers emphasized order, organization, and innovation, their students experienced increased self-esteem. Teachers' control over classroom discipline is directly associated with the student's level of academic self-esteem. Bahsin (1987) noted that aggressive adolescent misbehavior and shy withdrawals are symptomatic of teacher reinforced low self-esteem. Educators reinforce low self-esteem in two ways: by not modeling high self-esteem themselves and validating unhealthy comparisons among students.

Psychologist Erick Erikson noted that adolescents go through a stage known as Identify vs. Confusion. During this stage, the individual begins to distinguish their uniqueness from that of their peers. These views of themselves contain a mixture of positive and negative comparisons that may confuse the individual's sense of self-identification. According to Bingham and Stryker (1995), this is the stage when adolescents begin to develop their social cognition and sense of belonging. Adolescents want to know where they fit.

Research indicates that there is instability in identity within adolescents (Roe & Gunilla, 1998). Roe and Gunilla believed that adolescent female self-esteem is lower than adolescent males. Roe and Gunilla (1998) found in their study that if adolescent females fail to develop a strong self-identity, they are not able to develop healthy social relationships with peers, which leads to a further gap in understanding their own identity. Self-esteem comes from how people see themselves through the eyes of others. Often, middle school administrators do not understand the role that they play in building female self-esteem. Relational aggression,

therefore, becomes a symptom of not being able to relate to others or one's self in a healthy manner (Craig et al., 2000).

### **The Role of Body Image and Relating to Others**

The research shows that there appear to be two related factors contributing to low self-esteem in adolescent females: body image and relating to others. Amundson (1991) found that negative attitudes about one's physical appearance and poor relationships with family and peers were more significantly related to low self-esteem in adolescent girls than any results of biological puberty.

As girls develop into adolescence, it is important for them to develop significant relationships with others, and to a certain extent, physical attractiveness plays a role in that process (Amundson, 1991). In a similar vein, five issues including race, socioeconomic status, early physical development, the role of religion, as well as body objectification, predicted low self-esteem in eighth-grade girls. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) determined that feelings of authenticity in relationships and relating to others accounted for over two-thirds of the variance in self-esteem among girls Crick and Grotpeter (1995) sampled.

### **Family and School**

There is a clear link between a student's family and school in supporting the development of self-esteem. As students split their waking hours between home and school, these two environments should work together to increase self-esteem and lower unhealthy comparisons. The topic of many adolescent aggressive bullying conversations is the belief that one person or group is superior or inferior to others by comparison that often leads to this decreased self-esteem.

## **The Role of Family**

Along these lines, family relationships also play a role in female adolescent levels of self-esteem. As early adolescents mature, there is an increasing desire to have control within the family and to take part in making family decisions (Amundson, 1991). When adolescent girls believe that they do not have adequate opportunities to take part in family decision-making, they tend to have lower levels of self-esteem (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Likewise, if an early adolescent female perceives that her parents are not in touch with her developmental needs, then she is at risk for low self-esteem during the transition from sixth to seventh grade (Maguen & Armistead, 2006).

The role of family relationships is important in the development of young girls' self-esteem. Adolescents living in a relational environment believe that their parents trust them and are interested in their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Also, being in a school setting that is supportive of social development helps students to value themselves. Johnstone (1992) argued that all relationships are built on status: Bullying is merely a result of an individual lowering the perception of another to make themselves feel better, raising their status through lowering another's.

Another aspect of family that influenced an adolescent's self-esteem was parental identification (Amundson, 1991). This was where a child began to adopt the characteristics of the same-sex parent. While one can imagine the potential benefits of parental identification, potential liability exists if the adolescent, through such identification, becomes aware of the parent's expectations for him or her and then fails to meet those expectations (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). For adolescent males, parental identification alone predicts high levels of self-esteem, regardless of whether his parents reported being satisfied with him. However, for

adolescent girls, identification with her parents has a positive outcome on self-esteem, but only to the extent that the mother reports being satisfied with her daughter (Amundson, 1991).

This phenomenon implies that an adolescent female who identifies with a rejecting parent is at an increased risk for lower self-esteem. In these situations, it was of great importance to encourage these girls to develop relationships outside of the family (e.g., with teachers, friends, or mentors) to establish other relational sources of self-evaluation aside from their parents. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) noted that the students who had increased support from their parents during and after the transition to adolescence had a greater sense of belonging.

### **The Role of Peers**

Relationships among peers play a vital role in their sense of belonging when students can make friends, whether, in the cafeteria, the classroom, or on a sports team, they feel more connected to school (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Having friends at school can support social adjustment and involvement in school-related activities. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) also found that middle school students that are socially connected have a considerably greater sense of adjustment and a smoother transition into ninth grade than those who had lesser acceptance from their peers in middle school.

### **The Role of Middle School Educators**

Students also spend much of their day with educators. These educators serve in place of parents for much of the day. In Latin, this term is known as *in loco parentis*. Teachers and administrators must play a role in helping to foster and maintain their students' self-esteem. Elias and Zinsd, (2003) believed that a school's efforts to promote an emotionally safe environment enables students to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring, productive, non-violent, ethical, and productive members of society.

The middle school educator also must be taken into consideration. There was a study conducted in Britain by Boulton (1997), which examined educators' beliefs about bullying. He analyzed survey data from a sample of 138 elementary and secondary teachers to discover educator attitudes toward bullying. Educators were asked to identify behaviors that they perceived as bullying; many of those surveyed listed physical attacks, verbal threats, and the use of coercion as examples of bullying behaviors. However, 25% of the participants did not report name-calling, spreading nasty rumors, stealing items, social exclusion, or laughing at someone as bullying behaviors (Boulton, 1997).

According to Simmons (2011), the perception of many middle school educators is that adolescent female aggressive behavior is simply a rite of passage. Much of the relational aggression on middle school campuses goes unnoticed until someone gets hurt observably (Gibson, 2003). Gibson notes that an educator acknowledges less than 5% of the aggression that happens in classrooms.

Educators often minimize and underestimate the severity and frequency of bullying incidents, as well as the long-term impact on the victims (Lumsden, 2002). A British investigation conducted by Pervin and Turner (1994) on bullying, found that 26% of students noted on a self-report that they had been bullied, while the staff of the school believed that only 5% to 10% had been bullied.

### **The Role of Bullying Perception**

Birkinshaw and Eslea, (1998) note that educators receive minimal incidents reported to them of indirect aggression compared to the reports of direct aggression. Physical aggression was more likely to be reported as educators more readily recognized it. Gibson (2003) noted that students perceive social aggression to be more severe than physical aggression. Jones and

Augustine (2015) argued in their research that the adult response to bullying significantly impacts student behavior.

Borg and Falzon (1990) suggested that educators are more likely to acknowledge male physical aggression than female social aggression. Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler, (1995) agreed when he noted that teachers rarely discuss bullying in their classrooms, and administrators rarely discuss bullying in their staff meetings, as they often perceive bullying to be a simple rite of passage. Birkinshaw and Eslea (1998) suggested that there is a reason for concern when educators can ignore the impact that is being had on the victims of adolescent aggression.

### **The Academic Impact of Relational Aggression**

The emotional product of aggression makes it difficult for the student to attend their academic responsibilities. According to Boyer, aggression makes most of its victims to disengage with their school activities (Boyer, 2010). As a result, it influences their class performance creating gaps in learning. Many of the victims have dropped from school and turned to crime, which hurts the community. Also, aggression makes some female victims miss classes, while others transfer to other schools.

Though female bullying is not always noticed, the symptomatic results of it could be seen clearly. Asher and Cole (1990) note that the impact on victims could: consist of tardiness or absenteeism from school, a decline in grades, and isolation issues that could carry over into adulthood. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) agree that students who are bullied had increased truancy and decline in their academic performance. Hoover (1996) found that a substantial number of students experienced social and academic trauma from being bullied.

Those who are bullied begin to exhibit avoidance behaviors, such as: skipping school, avoiding certain places or declining attendance in school events they would otherwise enjoy.

They may become run-a-ways, and in the more extreme cases, attempt suicide (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Victims face these problems during their school day, so they often fear or dread going to school. Victims consider the school as an unsafe place for themselves, and they try to avoid going to school. They usually do not actively participate in extra-curricular activities that take place at their school, which adversely impacts their academics and learning during their school day. Research done by Lazarus and Pfohl (2010) states that at least 7% of eighth-grade students stay at home at least once per month due to being bullied. Being bullied leads to depression and a lowering of confidence in these students (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Olweus (1993) agrees when he states that bullied victims are more at risk for symptoms of depression and low self-esteem as young adults than their non-victimized peers.

### **The Role of Sports**

One potential avenue for relationships outside of school, family, and peers is in team sports (Pedersen and Seidman, 2004). Playing sports in middle school is associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Part of the benefits derived from sports relates to its influence on young female body attitudes. For example, Pedersen and Seidman (2004) found that playing sports in middle school had a beneficial outcome on a young woman's self-esteem to the extent that it promoted a more positive body image, greater physical competence, and a more flexible gender role.

The research of Crick and Grotpeter (1995), suggests that there is a level of liberation found in sports that benefit self-esteem. The relational aspect of team sports is also of importance in fostering higher self-esteem in adolescent girls. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) also found that greater achievement in team sports among early adolescent girls predicted higher levels of self-esteem later in adolescence.

While these perceptions of competence in team sports are important in predicting global self-esteem, Pedersen and Seidman (2004) found no relationship between a girl's perception of competence in individual sports (e.g., swimming, skating, and aerobics) and her self-esteem. Thus, there seems to be something specific about the relational aspect of the team environment, and not just the physical activity itself, which promotes self-esteem in young girls.

### **The Role of the Environment**

The transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial one for early adolescents, which is when students first begin to experience an increase in academic demands, a decrease in teacher attention and an increase in social adjustment, as students are transitioning from adult-focused relationships to peer-focused relationships. An important part of this process is the ability to make new friends, as many of the former friends are shuffled off to diverse schools and new friendships must be established. For some students, it is difficult to make the switch to a new environment.

Along these same lines, Amundson (1991) proposed that some of the negative psychological changes (e.g., lowered self-esteem) that arise during female adolescent development result from a disparity between the adolescent's needs and what is provided by her environment. For example, early adolescent girls need increased autonomy while still being in an atmosphere with enough supportive relationships, and they may suffer if their surroundings are not providing this (Maguen & Armistead, 2006).

The educational environment itself has shown to have an impact on students. Eccles et al. (1993) theorize that if there are systematic differences between the environments in an elementary school and a middle school, then problems seen in adolescence may relate to this change in environment, rather than being the result of more intrinsic physiological changes

occurring during this developmental period. Middle school students are impacted differently depending on the school environment in which they attended. Maguen and Armistead (2006) conducted a longitudinal study to see if environmental differences are related to differences in self-esteem levels among early adolescents.

### **The Role of the Middle School Transition**

Maguen and Armistead (2006) conducted a longitudinal study comparing students in the same school district who attend two different types of school structures. Some students went to an Elementary School, grades Kindergarten through Sixth, then to a Junior High School. Other students attended an Elementary school that went from Kindergarten to Eighth grade and then a Senior High School. The K-6 cohort experienced two transitions during their school careers, while the K-8 cohort experienced only one transition, and this singular transition occurred two years later than the first transition of the K-8 cohort. Looking at differences between genders, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that the self-esteem of males continues to rise from sixth through tenth grades, regardless of the cohort. In contrast, the self-esteem of females appears to be significantly impacted by the type of transition that they experience. (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Maguen and Armistead (2006) believe that their findings support the idea that girls may not be developmentally ready to cope with the stress of school transitions. When they are young and have a stressful change early on, it can lead them to respond more negatively to later transitions (i.e., from Junior High School to Senior High School. When the girls experience their first school transition slightly later (from eighth to ninth grades in the K-8 cohort), they are emotionally mature and able to cope with the stressful transitional change (Amundson, 1991).

Junior High schools are often larger and less personal than elementary schools and may not offer the emotional and relational support that girls need in early adolescence. Today, people

see middle schools and junior high schools as interchangeable terms. When Weiss and Kipnes (2006) compared the self-esteem of eighth-grade students in K-8 schools to those in traditional middle schools (grades 6-8) they found that eighth-grade girls in the middle schools had significantly lower self-esteem than those in K-8 schools. Middle schools were originally designed to be a separate campus that would more adequately meet the social and emotional needs of early adolescents as they transition to high school (Pedersen and Seidman, 2004).

### **The Role of the Middle School Administrator**

The middle school administrator holds a very significant role in the school. He or she is the central figure who sets the tone for the climate and the culture (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzolf, 2006). Leadership, as much as classroom instruction impacts what students learn in schools. The administrator has an influential role in the school, which has a tremendous impact on adolescent relationships (Louis et al. 2010). Adolescents' social and relational experiences at school have been shown to influence the trajectory of their educational outcomes (Maguen & Armistead, 2006). Such is the reason why Leithwood and Riehl (2003) suggest that school climate should not only prepare students for their academic learning but their social learning as well.

Mason (2008) said that school leaders should assume their role as the bullying prevention official on their campuses. Mason suggests that they might do this through professional development for themselves and their teachers. An administrator can either send key members of the staff to workshops or bring in a guest who can train the staff on how to deal with this issue on their campus effectively.

Administrators must become educated on the factors that contribute to aggressive female behavior first, and then they should equip their teachers to become informed. Campbell (2008)

agrees with Mason that professional development is a good method of helping a campus to be educated on the issues of bullying: noting that teachers cannot be expected to effectively identify and deal with these behaviors until they are adequately trained.

Rice (2010) notes that administrative leadership has a strong impact on many factors that indirectly, but positively impact adolescent relationships. Teachers, parents, and students want to be a part of a middle school where students feel emotionally and physically safe attending, which contributes to an environment that discourages negative adolescent relationships. The primary role of the administrator is to ensure a safe learning environment. Bosworth, Ford, and Hernandez (2011) state that school safety is not just physical but emotional, intellectual, and social.

At one time, the administrator was primarily a building manager ensuring that all the key people were in place. Today, the role has expanded a great deal. Administrators are not only responsible for the maintaining of building operations, but for rigorous academic learning results, financial accountability, training students to compete in a rapidly changing global and technological world. Also, they teach social skills to students who come from multi-ethnic, different socioeconomic, and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (Portin et al., 2006). Bosworth et al. (2011) also note three areas of school leadership: managing a building's facilities, supporting professional work in the classroom, and building community relations with stakeholders. All of this must be done while maintaining an atmosphere that is emotionally and physically safe.

The school leader must supervise and monitor the atmosphere of the school (Willard, 2006). One thing that Willard suggests is that administrators put systems in place to monitor internet activity or install cameras in the open areas of the campus. This way, when bullying is

reported, the school has a way to verify any unseen bullying behaviors that were missed by adult supervision. Students should know that adults are safe people to turn to when they are being bullied.

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have described relationships within schools that enhance student development, suggesting that students who are engaged in warm and open relationships with teachers and administrators experience higher peer and social skills, increased academic performance, stronger task engagement, and motivation.

A school's role is to educate the entire being of students. If the school fails to educate an aspect of the child, then it has neglected to educate that child. Taylor and Adelman (2000) argued that if a school is focused only on academic instruction and school management in their efforts to help students attain academic success, they would likely fall short of their goal to educate students. Schools are most successful in their educational mission when they are integrating efforts to promote their children's academic, social, and emotional learning (Elias & Zins, 2003). Students spend up to 40 hours per week with their teachers and classmates together in the classroom, lunchroom, gymnasium, cafeteria, and hallway. In grade school, students are seldom away from their teachers and peers, which provides much time for the school to develop social and academic skills. This complete approach to education can foster positive adolescent relationships.

Responsible administrators must determine the role their campuses play in retaining students and keeping them emotionally and academically engaged until completion. A 2006 report commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation called *The Silent Epidemic* identified several school factors that influence a student's decision to drop out. Of the nearly 30% of general education students who drop out of school annually, 60% of the dropouts

indicated that it would have been important for them to have had at least one caring adult that they could talk to about their experiences with negative relational aggression (Maguen & Armistead, 2006).

Educators think that their primary role is to teach the assigned course and not realizing that their course is secondary and the students themselves are primary. Administrators and teachers must exhibit care for their students. To think that students could spend years in school buildings interacting with multiple teachers and administrators and not find one that they could have built a healthy social or academic relationship with is remarkable. The notion of caring has garnered increasing attention in recent years, often regarding a moral perspective on relationships. The research is showing that schools may have a proactive role to play in both the social and academic development of students.

Healthy adolescent relationships are essential to student success. Noddings (2005) suggests that schools cannot attend to the academic needs of their students without supporting students' need for caring relationships. Within the realm of student-teacher relationships, teachers have a responsibility not only to care for their students, but also to teach them to have the capacity or ability to care for others, learn new ideas, and embrace spiritual matters.

Many students come to school lost and confused and lacking in a stable identity, making them susceptible to aggressive social behavior. Amundson (1991) suggested that adolescents question their place in the universe and the degree to which they have control over their fate, but Noddings (2005) noted that schools spend far less time on these kinds of existential questions than on math and language arts. She advocates the adoption of a plan for education that integrates the concept of caring throughout the curriculum and focuses on student needs and interests, as well as academic content. The administrator's leadership role also impacts the

climate of the school. Hinduja and Patchin (2012) stated that school climate relates to the academic learning, social, and behavioral environment of its stakeholders. The administrator sets the tone in their building for academic and social development.

Administrators who are concerned about high academics must consider the overall climate of their buildings. Shindler and Jones (2011) note a correlation between climate and achievement. They surveyed the parents, students, and staff of 21 urban schools from elementary to secondary. They found that the quality of climate decreased between elementary and secondary and varied significantly from school to school. The survey showed a correlation to climate, achievement, and a sense of safety. Hinduja and Patchin (2012) indicate that schools that invest in creating a healthy school climate begin to see a decrease in students who are likely to bully than schools with weaker school climate.

Some administrators see relational aggression as a rite of passage. Simmons (2011) suggests that the perception of some adults in the school building is that aggressive social behavior rather direct or indirect, is a necessary part of the adolescent maturation process. Gibson (2003) said that adults usually do not notice indirect aggression, as it is overt. People are not being sent to the office for unkind words, rolled eyes, and group isolation. Adults often see direct aggression as more dangerous than indirect and thus feel there is less of a reason to intervene.

Administrators tend to take male bullying more seriously than female bullying. Borg and Falzon (1990) suggest that schools tend to minimize indirect aggression done female to female, as opposed to direct aggression done male to male. Banks (1997) confirmed this when he found that adults rarely discussed the topic of female bullying in school. He suggests raising the school personnel's awareness of the problem could create safer schools.

What role if any, does the school leadership have in dealing with bullies? The American school, which just a few years ago was looked upon as a key to solving many of society's problems, has become perceived as one of the problems. The public's perception of school has changed from one that supports the calling that "education prevents delinquency" to the belief that "schools create rather than prevent delinquency and discipline problems" (Duke, 1978, p. 435). The continuing problem of school aggression may be attributed in part to an inadequate conceptualization of the problem by its leadership.

Administrators must take the lead in solving the female adolescent aggressive behavior on their campuses. Wenk (1975) notes that the problem is a multifaceted one. If not handled correctly, this could require the complete restructuring of the public-school system. Wenk believes that schools as currently structured fail to provide students sufficient opportunity to develop into responsible citizens. Wenk believes that leadership has a responsibility to make the schools more responsive to all its students.

The middle school is negligent as it relates to relational aggression. Gold (1978) asked, "Does the school provoke or ameliorate aggressive behavior?" Gold maintained that the school controls "the major social and psychological forces that generate delinquency" (p. 290) and consequently is a significant provoker of delinquent behavior. Gold's argument is consistent with the findings of Elliott and Voss (1974), who conducted a longitudinal study that notes that school behavior has a strong relationship to delinquency (p. 203).

Though schools do not control the home life or the socio-economic background of its students; some believe that the school must be proactive in dealing with challenges that may arise on campus due to issues that may spring from home. Polk and Scaeffler (1975) argued that particularly on students from low-income families, the way many schools were organized

guarantees that some students failed and that some were discipline problems. In sum, Polk and Schaeffer believe that a youngster's commitment to aggressive behavior is largely a consequence of negative school experiences. However, others who examine the problem of relational aggression believe that the school, though it is an important factor, is not the administrative source of disruption and delinquency. There are forces external to the school, such as family, community, and peers.

Wenk (1975) provides yet another perspective on the school's contribution to adolescent aggression. Wenk attributes the increase in disruptive behavior across all schools as a reflection of the disparity between society's greater complexity and instability and the school's maintenance of programs intended for and geared to a simpler, more predictable world. No matter how the school leadership's role is viewed as it relates to cause, many agree that schools play a central role regarding intervention for aggressive behavior among adolescent female youth.

A crucial antecedent to any successful program to counter relational aggression may be the explicit admission that aggressive behavior is a problem in schools. Schools that initiate a specific program to reduce disruptive and aggressive behaviors, by so doing, are acknowledging and defining that there is indeed a problem that needs addressing. Thus, its various constituencies may not necessarily share the perception of the problem of school violence. Resolving the differences and defining the problem may be the first, and most important, step in reducing female adolescent aggression.

An administrator who wants to facilitate positive efforts for all children may have a difficult time doing so, but an administrator who did not undoubtedly failed. The adults in schools must focus on their interpersonal relationships. They must cooperate, coordinate, give and receive social feedback, change some of their time-honored behaviors, and be willing to

change first and not wait for children to change. Administrators are in a position of power to promote cooperation among teachers and to give feedback that builds teachers' skills and increase their confidence in dealing with difficult problems such as female bullying.

A school's culture is largely a reflection of its leadership. There is much evidence in both the United States and Great Britain that supports the position that an administrator or head of a school does impact the social and psychological climate in that school. The climate, in turn, influences not only the academic accomplishments of the students but the incidence of delinquent behavior as well (Wynne, 1980). Put simply, for the successful school; these problems were often on their way to being solved by the appointment of the right person as an administrator who addressed these challenges.

Teachers, parents, administrators, school board, the community, and students all have a role. Schooling can improve student-by-student, classroom-by-classroom, and teacher-by-teacher. The teacher's role in the reduction of school violence and aggression is, of course, crucial. Just as obviously, the teacher is not the only factor involved. Parents, the administration of the school, and the community as a whole all play a part, but the teacher is often the person at the forefront of any effort to cope successfully with the problem.

Rohrkemper and Brophy (1980) indicated widespread teacher unpreparedness for dealing effectively with aggression. Their findings were even more striking when one realizes that the teachers in the study; were nominated by their administrators as outstanding or average in dealing with problem students. Given that all the teachers in that study had at least three years of experience and had been recommended as either average or outstanding at dealing with problem students by their administrators, the data suggested widespread knowledge and skill deficiencies in these areas. Relatively few teachers had specific knowledge, let alone training in behavior

modification, mental health consultation, or other strategies for dealing with problem students. Many teachers stated a desire for such training, but some indicated that their job was to teach and not to act as a therapist for students with personality or behavior problems (Rohrkemper & Brophy, 1980, p.72).

### **Gaps in Literature**

According to Odgers and Moretti (2002), there is still much to learn about aggressive behavior among girls. For instance, Mishna (2004) writes that most studies about aggressive behavior among girls, lack interview data, and are quantitative. Qualitative interviews are vital and needful because they uncover nuances quantitative surveys cannot address. More research is required to examine gender differences in relational aggression. Mishna (2004) asserts that researchers have paid more attention to aggressive youth rather than the victims themselves.

There is little research examining the role of the school administrator's play in dealing with this issue. There has been nothing found in the research so far that takes a candid look at how the administrator is dealing with bullying on his or her campus. Much of the research notes the need for bullying programs or seeks to examine program effectiveness. In asking these questions, the researcher went behind the scene and delved into the interpersonal feelings and perceptions of those who deal with this phenomenon daily: female adolescent students and middle school administrators.

### **Summary**

In summary, there is a need for an examination of the impact of negative adolescent relationships. The relationship between student and administrator is, by nature, one of unequal power. As a result, administrators who choose to encourage trusting, caring relationships with their students must assess not only their perceptions but also their students' perceptions as well.

Reciprocity occurs when students are motivated to engage in learning activities with a teacher they believe demonstrates respect for their opinions and conceptual understandings (Maguen & Armistead, 2006).

On a campus, caring relationships involve a type of reciprocal action between the caregiver and the cared-for (Amundson, 1991). This literature has shown that an empathetic understanding of positive reciprocal engagement between administrators and students is needful to enhance staff and student relationships, which in turn, may contribute to the development of better school cultures, which will enrich positive adolescent female relationships among students and their peers (Maguen and Armistead, 2006).

This study found gaps in specific issues of relational aggression. A few of the studies reviewed the perception of teachers and administrators on the issue of bullying and their response. Most of the existing studies investigate aggression issues among boys, which was the focus of reviewed studies carried out within the last 25 years. Bullying correlates with relational aggression. Thus, much of the research examines bullying among youths. Moreover, due to the increased use of technology among young people, this section also reviewed the influence of cyber-bullying.

In reviewing the literature, the societal implications of bullying begin to emerge. It impacts both the aggressors and the victims. Both qualitative and quantitative research has examined its consequences on teens. Second, the literature review found that relational aggression has a social and academic implication on its victims. Finally, studies also show the significance of relational aggression among adolescents (Wiseman, 2002; Simmons, 2009). This study should be important for policymakers and school administrators. It will enable them to

come up with policies on how to curb this behavior in institutions of learning by understanding the lived experience of middle school administrators in responding to female adolescents.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This study examines administrators' experiences with the academic and social impact that relational aggression has on middle school girls in Thorn Rose Middle Schools (pseudonym). Erikson's (1993) Theory of Development and Miller's (1997) Relational-Cultural Theory serves as the theoretical framework to guide the research. The research is conducted using a collective case study examining the experience of the middle school administrators in dealing with relational aggression and how they respond to the impact of this behavior on a school's social and academic climate. The data collection process includes non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Once the data was collected, I followed Corbin and Strauss' (2015) coding procedures to identify key points and concepts that enabled me to build a unique storyline that explained the lived experience of the participants. In this chapter, the design, questions, setting, participants, procedures, the role of the researcher, methods of data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations are discussed.

### **Design**

A qualitative methodology was used to understand the subjective experiences of middle school administrators regarding the consequences of relational aggression on Thorn Roses' middle school campuses. This research used a collective case study approach, which examined each administrator's experience with the academic and social impact of relational aggression. Yin (2014) stated that a case study design allows researchers to investigate real-life contexts by providing insight into the phenomenon under investigation. This study sought to better prepare

future administrators for the role of addressing the impact of relational aggression on their campuses.

Creswell (2014) asserts that a case study is inductive and exploratory. Creswell (2013) defined a case study as one that "involves studying a phenomenon or issue explored through single or multiple cases within a bounded system" (p.57). According to Stake (1995), case studies are either intrinsic or instrumental. Instrumental is when the researcher seeks understanding in how a case relates to other cases. With intrinsic, the researcher has an interest in the case itself (p.77). This case is intrinsic as the researcher being a middle school administrator has an interest in how others respond to this phenomenon. Creswell (2013), says that the focus of the case study is to develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or multiple cases.

This collective case study included 10 participants in which multiple cases were examined (Creswell, 2013). Each participant represents a single case. A cross-case synthesis was used for data analysis to look for patterns and themes. The researcher attempted to draw an underlying cross-case conclusion from the data. Once the data has been analyzed, the researcher sought to see if there is a single set of "cross-case" conclusions.

This study seeks to increase administrators' knowledge of the bullying phenomenon, which in turn improves their response to it. This qualitative methodology provided a systematic and in-depth evaluation of study participants, which was beneficial for discovering meaning given to experience (Stake, 1995). The phenomenon in this study was qualitative because it needed interpretation rather than measurement. The respondents played a significant role by potentially providing vital information and relevant recommendations. This was a collective

case study that explored the female bullying phenomenon and to understand its academic and social impact.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

- (RQ1): How do middle school administrators describe relational aggression (female bullying)?
- (RQ2): How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied?
- (RQ3): How does a middle school administrators' perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response?

### **Setting**

Snyder et al., (2016) noted in the annual US Department of Education report that there were 13,322 middle schools in the United States as of its 2014-2015 digest. The same source noted that as of 2015, the education system of the state of Oklahoma had 237 middle schools. The administrators' perceptions were examined in the middle school environment. The 10 administrators were recruited as participants from among the 25 secondary schools in this Oklahoma urban school district.

This school system was chosen to participate in this investigation because of its diverse student and staff population. The district selected is located in Northern Oklahoma. It was selected because it was an urban community that served a diverse demographic. According to the district's website as of 2018, it is 34% Hispanic, 24.4% African American, 10% Multiracial, 24.4% Caucasian, 5.2% Native American, and 2% Asian. This level of diversity allowed for a

broader generalization of the findings. Therefore, by utilizing the chosen middle school system as the setting for these case studies and the school administrators within these schools as the sample population, it was reasonable to expect that responses to the research questions represented more of a norm for the other middle schools in this district.

### **Participants**

A purposeful criterion sampling technique was used to maximize the variation sampling of participants. The participants in this study were 10 middle school administrators. The essential requirement was being a middle school administrator in Thorn Rose Schools (pseudonym) with a minimum of five years' experience as an educator. To prevent any possible administrator gender bias from skewing the data, the 10 administrators must not be homogeneous in gender and racial identity. Patton (2015) described maximum variation as one which provided for a heterogeneous sampling, such as in the gender, age, and ethnicity of the participants.

Creswell (2013) stated that purposeful criterion sampling occurs when the researcher selects participants who share specific criteria or have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Purposeful criterion sampling was an appropriate sampling method for this study as it allowed the administrators who had personal knowledge of this phenomenon to share their experiences.

The purposeful sampling method provided a starting point for exploration because it allowed for a basis for reliable and credible participant recruitment. It also offered assurances to the participants; as the aim of this research study was to explore their perspectives. The study was conducted with 10 respondents. The target respondents of this study were middle school administrators at Thorn Rose Middle School campuses. Miles and Huberman (2014) state that this is a substantial number of participants as having less would impact the confidence of any

generalizable findings. However, they also suggested that too many cases become too large for adequate data analysis.

The study only had participants from the same district, which allowed for face-to-face interviews with follow-up interviews when necessary. These parameters were set to examine the lived experience of the participants.

### **Procedures**

Upon obtaining official Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, administrators were invited to participate in the study and complete their consent and confidentiality forms (see Appendix A). Upon receipt of all forms, the individual participants were interviewed with open-ended questions in a semi-structured format (see Appendix C), a non-participant observation was conducted on each administrator's campus, (see Appendix B) and a focus group (see Appendix D) was conducted with the 10 administrators in this study (Williams & Katz, 2001).

An informational letter about the study was sent to all middle school administrators in the Thorn Rose Public Schools district who meet the above criteria. The district's office of Leadership Development was invited to assist in recruiting participants by allowing the posting of flyers, making announcements in leadership meetings, and emailing of invitational letters to campus leaders that fit the criteria. Those who are interested in taking part in the study contacted the researcher through email for more information. If participants were interested and met the criteria to participate in the study, a meeting was held to provide an overview of the study and to secure their commitment to participation.

Once the participants agreed to take part in the study and have completed the consent forms; any clarifying questions that participants had concerning the study were answered, and an appointment was scheduled with the researcher for an in-depth one-on-one interview. Each

participant received a hard or digital copy of the signed consent. Participants were also informed that they might be contacted to answer clarifying questions after the data collection to ensure accuracy. Participants were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any time by a written notice of a desire to withdraw.

While the data collection was being completed; interviews were being transcribed, a focus group was being held, and observations were being performed, the study used bracketing and coding to look for identified themes.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am currently an elementary administrator at a public school in Texas. I have had the privilege of working extensively with middle school teenagers in the public school system in Oklahoma and the charter school system in Texas. I hold a BA from Oral Roberts University, an MS from Texas A&M-Commerce, and an Ed. S from Liberty University in Educational Leadership. Currently, I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at Liberty University.

One issue of interest and perspective for me was my personal experience as a teacher and a middle school assistant principal. In this role, I have experienced a host of challenges dealing with the impact of bullying. I have experienced questioning bystanders and disciplining bullies while supporting victims. In this study, I was the sole investigator, facilitating and leading semi-structured interviews, observation, and a focus group, reflecting upon transcribed data, discovering and interpreting emerging themes, contextualizing those themes, and experiences, and articulating them in a narrative.

My goal for this study was to interpret the experiences of middle school administrators in a manner that was useful to public school communities across the country considering the

challenges that schools are confronted with today, which is the reason I have related my own experiences as an educator who worked with bullies, victims, and bystanders. I was aware throughout the collection of the data and the analysis that it was the participants' experience that had to be interpreted and not mine.

A researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A researcher has to record data examining personal reflections and reactions and ensure all confidential information of the research remains undisclosed. All the data in the study was mediated through the human instrument rather than machines or inventories. To achieve this, I described the various aspects of self, which included assumptions and biases, experiences, and expectations that qualified my ability to conduct the research. I asked questions that explored the depth of conversation with the respondents using the theoretical frames (Erikson, 1993; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Codes were used to ensure that the identity of the participants remained anonymous. I asked questions to understand the underlying bullying issues in schools. A rapport was built with a participant that ensured their willingness to participate. Participants were not enticed or forced to give responses. I ensured that the focus group, observation, and interviews were done appropriately and ethically. I have been an educator for almost two decades. I have worked with many students, teachers, and administrators over this time. I knew that I had personal unconscious biases that could impact my hearing and interpretation of the data. I was self-aware that this bias existed and was ready to note it by annotating my emotions and thoughts that arose as the data was collected and reviewed.

Open-ended questions were asked and usually began with the words: who, why, and how, allowing the respondents to reflect and share their own experience. Friendliness-bias at times led

to responses that were not vital for the research. As these administrators and I were in the same field, the conversation veered into other realms that are job-related, but not topic related. I had to be diligent in keeping each interaction on task and topic. I kept detailed records to minimizing errors and misinformation during data analysis.

I noted trends in the information from various participants but made every effort not to react to ideologies that were lacking or contrary to my individual personal beliefs. Bracketing was challenging to do as we are often blinded by our own biases (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I began this process by keeping contemporaneous notes or memos to document my reactions. As I reviewed my notes, I separated what appeared to be my interpretation of the data and not an explicit recording of the data itself. This technique was utilized to set aside any personal biases (Patton, 2015).

### **Data Collection**

Green, Camilli, and Elmore (2006) stated that a case study must borrow from multiple sources to ensure the study is robust. This study consisted of data collection and data analysis. It was also vital to converge sources of data to ensure comprehensive results that reflected a proper understanding of the participants. Seidman (2013) supported this concept by writing, “I interviewed because I was interested in other people's stories.” Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. Seidman noted that when people told stories, they were selecting details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. Based on the scope of this study, my research used interviews, non-participant observation, and a focus group as the triangulated data collection vehicles (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Interviews were conducted carefully to ensure a reliable case study. Purposeful sampling was considered appropriate for the participant data collection. Interviews were a form of

conversation with the respondents in which they were required to respond accordingly. Three types of question topics were employed by the study: administrator experience, student impact, and administrator response.

The subjects were interviewed individually in a semi-structured format, which was done first to provide an opportunity for a foundational relationship between the researcher and participants before the focus group meeting. Then, a building walk-through was conducted to observe the climate of the school as it related to the perception of the administrators. Once a relationship of trust had been established with the administrator, it was more readily acceptable to roam the building. Lastly, a focus group was held to see how administrators collectively perceived this phenomenon. At this time, any discrepancies or confirmations were noted from the various sets of data (Deshefy-Longhi, Sullivan-Bolyai, & Dixon, 2009).

Creswell (2014) said that follow-up meetings are helpful to gather and clarify information. Follow-up occurred as needed. Pseudonyms were given to the participants to protect their identities and maintain the confidentiality of the conversation. For each interview, participants were interviewed using a handheld electronic device. The recordings were deleted after being transcribed, and member checked. The transcription allowed the interview to be reviewed multiple times to interpret the experiences articulated by the participants accurately.

Participants were meet individually on their campuses or at an off-campus location, depending on the participants' preferences and schedules. Each interview was scheduled for an hour. Participants were asked for permission to audio record the sessions and transcribe each interview for analysis.

These questions were asked of the middle school administrators in their office or off-site, based on their availability for an appointment not to exceed one hour. Each interview was audio-

recorded with a password protected handheld recorder. It was backed up on the hard drive of a password-protected laptop. While the administrator was speaking, the researcher also took note of the themes and trends in the conversation. The researcher also used a field journal to record notes from interviews or anything observed during the interviews. These interviews took place over five weeks once IRB approval was granted. The sequence and rationale for data collection were noted below.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

First, a semi-structured interview was conducted, which provided an opportunity to acquire detailed and descriptive information from the participant's experiences using a conversational interview format. It allowed for delving into the human experience regarding relational aggression from the administrators' perspective. According to Turner (2010), structured interviews are a type of interview in which the interviewer asks a particular set of predetermined questions, while the unstructured interview is a type of interview in which the questions are not prepared in advance of the interview. Fowler (1995) notes that in a structured interview when a respondent does not understand a question, the interviewer is generally limited to provide any explanation beyond repeating the question. Structured interviews are often used when one has very large samples and is looking for data that can be generalized to a large population.

A semi-structured interview is a hybrid of structured and unstructured, which means that some questions are predetermined, while others arose naturally through conversation. This method of interviewing was chosen because it provided guided questions that covered the topic while allowing the interviewer discretion about question order and follow-up questions, though the original questions were standardized. Bradley and Harrell (2009) say this kind of interview

collection has a conversational style, which is deemed best since the interviewer and interviewees had the same career and naturally had a more conversational tone.

Semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers it provides. A semi-structured interview was used with the 10 Thorn Rose Public School administrators (see Appendix C). The interview consisted of open-ended questions that comprised of planned questions and unplanned follow-up probes.

### **Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe the word aggression? What types of behaviors come to mind in your experience?
2. What are some of the most common forms of relational aggression on your campus?
3. What are some of the characteristics of relational aggression that you have observed?
4. In your opinion, what is the motivation behind relational aggressive behavior?
5. Give some examples of adolescent aggressive behavior that you have witnessed on your campus this year.
6. What influence do you see relational aggression having on academic progress?
7. What impact do you see relational aggression having on-campus social development in peer relationships?
8. What impact does relational aggression have on self-esteem?
9. How are incidents of relational aggression usually reported to you? Who does the reporting?
10. In what ways have anti-bullying programs been effective in dealing with this issue on your campus?

11. Describe the types of professional developments that you have attended to enable you to address the impact of incidents of relational aggression on your campus.

12. Is there anything else you would like to mention about female bullying?

Numbers one through five were Experience Questions which were tied to (RQ1): How do middle school administrators define and describe relational aggression (girl bullying)? They were designed to elicit information about the administrators' experience with female bullying primarily by exploring how they defined and described relational aggression as administrators. The literature examined the difficulty of defining bullying. (Bjorkvist et al. 1992; Olweus, 1978; Arora, 1996). For the school community to understand how to address the phenomenon, there must be an understanding of how leadership defined it.

Numbers sixth through eighth were Impact Questions which are tied to (RQ2): How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied? They are designed to explore the academic and social impact of adolescent aggression on the students that these administrators lead. The literature tells us that when students undergo continuous stress to their relationships that academic and social impact is to be expected. (Henkin, 2012; Brady & Conn, 2006). These questions seek to examine the extent of that impact from the administrators' perception.

Numbers nine through twelve are Response Questions. They are tied to the third research question, which dealt with the response of the administrators to adolescent aggression on their campuses. (RQ3): How does a middle school administrators' perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response? The need for a proper response was noted in the literature. According to the literature, bystanders made up of both students and adults were often passive in their response

(Amundson, 1991). If the stakeholder response is to improve, the current leadership response must be examined.

These questions helped to unpack the perceptions of these administrators about adolescent female aggressive behaviors at their campuses. This questioning technique used probing and exploratory, open-ended questions in a semi-structured format (Galletta, 2013). All interviews were recorded on a password protected electronic device, then uploaded to a secured laptop as a backup file (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interviewee was also reminded that he or she could discontinue the interview at any time.

### **Field Testing**

A field test was conducted before the actual data collection to evaluate the validity of the interview script (Presser, 2004). A panel of five central office administrators who work for the district was requested via email to review the interview questions. The panel, who were ineligible to be study participants, determined the effectiveness of the interview questions and offered suggestions and feedback for fine-tuning. These candidates were chosen their research expertise and familiarity with the subject being studied. Necessary revisions were made to the interview questions based on the results of the field test.

### **Campus Observation with Field Notes**

The second phase of data collection was the use of non-participant observation with the use of field notes. Wilson and Corlett (1995) said that direct non-participant observation is a non-intrusive technique where the observer sits passively and records what is happening. He does caution to be careful of the Hawthorn Effect; meaning people tend to behave differently when they are being observed. This is contrary to Mulhall (2003), who argued that the Hawthorn effect is overemphasized. Mulhall (2003) believed that after initially entering the field,

professionals become too busy to maintain behavior that is radically different from their norm. This belief was supported by Frankenberg (1980), who stated that one could only perform for so long before returning to type.

According to Patton (2015), observations consisted of observable conversations, interactions, and behaviors. The areas observed were the school's common areas. Though it cannot be completely avoided; efforts were made to ensure discretion and avoidance of unnecessary social interaction with those being observed. My goal was to be noticed while maintaining a non-participant role. The non-participant observation was chosen because it allowed for monitoring the environment of the administrators' lived experience.

The observations enabled insight into perception and how participants responded to relational aggression on their campuses. The observation allowed for the observing of the verbal and non-verbal interactions of teachers, students, and administrators. Observation captured the social setting in which people functioned while also informing about the influence of the physical environment (Mulhall, 2002).

The observations were done at 10 middle school campuses. Each campus observation lasted for a minimum of one hour. Two schools were visited per week for five consecutive weeks. Observations commenced once IRB and district approval were granted. The campus observations were done following the administrators' semi-structured interviews. Written permission was obtained via email request to do a building observation to look for evidence of the administrator's female behavioral perceptions within the building's climate. The observation protocol (Appendix B) helped answer the research question (RQ3) How does a middle school administrator's perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response? Using the observation protocol, I

hoped to discover the general perception of female behavior and gain insight into the response that the administrator had set for their campus regarding aggressive relational behavior, which was evidenced from any posters, initiatives, or campus level response to any relational aggressive issues that arose during the visit. These observations were done after the semi-structured interviews at the pre-chosen middle school sites.

The data included observation field notes (Appendix B). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) define field notes as a written description that details the observation of a researcher. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) say that field notes should also document casual contacts and chance encounters with participants. Mulhall (2002) says that every observer has their data recording preference. He goes on to say that these observations could be recorded during or after each observation. He recommended contemporaneous notes so that details and events were not lost to memory. These contemporaneous field notes were documented on a password protected electronic device, then uploaded to a secured laptop as a backup file (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

I spent three to four hours of analyzing field notes for one every hour of observation. I was of the frame of mind that everything that occurs in the field is potentially a source of data. Mulhall (2002) says that observation is using eyes as well as ears. Even small talks can lend insight into people's perspectives when viewed in context. The field notes included descriptions of people, events, and conversations, as well as the observer's actions and expressed feelings. The conversations were noted as precisely as possible. The field notes represented an attempt to record on paper everything that can possibly be related to the observation.

### **Focus Group**

Thirdly, a focus group was conducted with all 10 participants. A focus group is a cluster of individual participants selected to share their experience concerning a research topic (Gibbs,

1997). This form of qualitative data provides insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants (Krueger, 1994). The rich exchange that can happen in this social format helped gain a deeper understanding from points of agreement and disagreement as participants can challenge or respond to colleagues. Unlike the semi-structured interview, a focus group interview capitalizes on communication between participants to generate data, which means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question, in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experience. The method is particularly useful to examine not only what people think, but how they think, and why they think that way (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This method was advantageous for this study because the interaction among administrators yielded significant information as the interviewees held heterogeneous views but were from a homogeneous field and were apt to cooperate as peers (Krueger, 2015).

The focus group addressed questions (RQ1) How do middle school administrators define and describe relational aggression (girl bullying)? (RQ2) How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied? (RQ3) How does a middle school administrator's perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response? Administrators shared their experience with female bullying, how students are being impacted on their campuses, and how they as administrators are responding.

I had hoped to learn information in the focus group setting that was not uncovered with the individual interviews as some participants in a one-on-one setting, were more reluctant to share certain parts of their experience. I set the ground rules for an appropriate habit of discussion to encourage all participants to engage and minimize more vocal individuals from

dominating the conversation (Krueger, 1994). The focus group discussion questions were piloted with the district Instruction Leadership Directors. Any feedback from them was utilized to fine-tune questions before they were implemented in the final version.

Amundson (1991) emphasized the need to use a proper measurement instrument to ensure a sound basis for entire research efforts. A focus group was one of the three instruments used with administrators to examine their perception and response to negative female adolescent relationships among middle school girls and the bullying crisis among teenagers at the middle school level. A focus group was conducted to collect the varied responses from the target respondents.

According to Krueger (2015), a focus group is a natural phenomenon. As people often find themselves engaged in conversations about topics of interest to them with family, friends, or co-workers. As it relates to a qualitative study and this one, in particular, I determined the limit of participants in the group to be 10 administrators, and I established the focus of the topic that was discussed. I provided and encouraged a safe and permissive environment for this conversation, guided by the following questions:

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. What experience do you have addressing incidents of relational aggression?
2. What supports have you been given to better address relational aggressive activity on your campuses?
3. What types of changes in social behavior do you notice from students who are victims of relational aggression?
4. What types of changes in academic behavior do you notice from students who are victims of relational aggression?

5. What has been your response to these academic and social behavioral changes?
6. What advice can you give to a first-year middle school administrator about dealing with the phenomenon on their campus for the upcoming school year?
7. Follow up questions were asked based on the participants' responses.

Three types of question topics were explored: group experience, impact on climate, and administrator response. Focus group interview questions one and two sought to explore the group's experience with the phenomenon and given support if any. The literature notes the following regarding the role of support within the phenomenon: bullies are often supported unintentionally through bystanders (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012), victims of bullying are often left without support (McPherson et al. 2006), and that social support is necessary for each role of development Erikson (1993). These questions sought to understand where or how administrators individually and collectively draw support in dealing with this experience.

Questions three and four address behavioral changes and the impact on the school's climate. Hinduja and Patchin (2012) state that school climate relates to the academic and social behavior of a school's environment. One role of an administrator is to set the tone for academic and social expectations. It is imperative for the administrator to know the impact that this behavior has on individuals and how it impacts the climate for others.

Question five addressed the response of the administrators. These questions dealt with the heart of educational leadership. Once a problem had been identified and understood, the next thing was to think through possible solutions. According to the literature, researchers have long acknowledged male aggression (Borg & Falzon, 1990). Female aggression was rarely discussed by teachers or administrators in staff meetings (Charach et al., 1995). Administrators must take the lead on addressing this issue as it can no longer be ignored. (Birkinshaw & Eslea, 1998). The

remaining question addressed advice from current administrators that would be helpful to others who are entering administration at Thorn Rose middle schools.

This method allowed for the collection of a quantity of information in a limited time frame. The focus group interview was scheduled for 90 minutes in the morning before one of the district's monthly leadership meetings held at the district's Learning Center. The formal request of the date and time was scheduled with the district's Superintendent for Secondary Schools once IRB approval was granted. The focus group interview was video recorded with an electronic device and then uploaded to a secured laptop as a backup file (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

Corbin and Strauss (2015) asserted that qualitative analysis involved a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis. This collective case study ensured immersion in the study. Collective case studies were done to provide an understanding of multiple sites. Multiple cases were used to detail descriptions and themes presented within a case followed by thematic analysis across cases. The data was analyzed using the Stake's model of categorical aggregation to determine individuals within case themes and then analyzed for cross-case themes (Stake, 2006).

Creswell (2013) says that when multiple cases are chosen, a detailed description of each case should be made to look for emerging themes within-case and then a thematic analysis examined across-cases. Lincoln and Guba (1985) called this examination "the lessons learned" from the cases. Ayres, Kavanaugh, and Knafl, (2003) balanced both the within- and across-case analyses interactively. The purpose of the cross-case analytic strategy was to compare the experience of all participants and identify categories of significant statements that are common

among them. A case must be examined individually and then interchangeably to derive generalizability.

This approach allowed for analysis to begin the moment each interview was conducted. The cross-case synthesis was the technique applied to the analysis of collective cases. (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Each participant was analyzed as a separate case. The individual cases were analyzed to draw cross-case conclusions (Yin, 2014). The purpose of an across-case analysis was to compare the experience of each participant and identify categories of significance that are shared. The coded data from the individual cases were grouped into themes to understand the collective.

As the questions were being answered, active listening skills were utilized. Themes were identified from the interview process. These themes and characteristics were identified for further consideration and development. Also, data reduction needed to take place. Once all the interviews and observations were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed. All transcriptions were taken from the semi-structured interviews, and any non-topic side comments and vocal fillers were removed from the content.

The data was collected, recorded, and then transcribed. It was read multiple times with various colored highlighters, noting themes and trends in the information. Once there was a thorough understanding of the data collected, the information was categorized by noting similar topics or repeated themes. This process began immediately after potential themes were identified and noted for any recurring patterns that seemed to be consistent in interviews. These were then revisited to see if they still applied once all interviews were completed.

The research verified the accuracy of observation notes and interview questions and obtained any needed clarifications of vernacular or word choice. Once themes were identified,

follow-up was scheduled with participants to see if this was consistent with their stated perceptions. Member checking allowed the researcher to establish credibility by seeking input, confirmation, and clarification from participants. The study did member checking by having participants review if my interpretations were indeed representative and reflective of their perceptions at the time of the interview or observation. If there were any discrepancies, they were addressed. Once the conclusions were drawn, the participants had another chance to review the findings for any discrepancies in stated perspectives.

Synthesizing the collective-case studies was the technique for this study, as suggested by Yin (2014). Each administrator and their campus were analyzed separately. The information gained was examined thoroughly for recurring themes, phrases, and patterns. As themes became apparent, conclusions were made as to relevance. This process of separating data is known as coding. The excellence of the research rests on the excellence of the coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

### **Coding and Bracketing**

Coding is an analysis of the data for recurring themes and sub-themes. Miles and Huberman (2014) listed three types of coding: descriptive, axial, and analytical. The first is the storage of data known as descriptive coding. The second is gathering the information together by topics known as axial coding. The third is the development of data concepts known as analytical coding. The use of these three types of coding in this research enabled the identifying of patterns and themes. The coding allowed the researcher to label information and show how it related, linked, and interacted between the cases.

Hand coding was used to analyze this collective case study research data (Saldaña, 2016). Once the interviews were transcribed, and the member checking process was completed,

then the data was hand-coded to identify patterns and common themes that emerge from the interviews. The hand-coding was done laying out the printed interview transcripts and observation notes and highlighting quotes of participants with different colors. Wide stanza margins were kept for annotation. Research journal and field notes were cross-referenced for accuracy and explicit descriptions of any identified themes.

Before the coding process, I hired a transcriber to transcribe the data line by line, and then I segmented the data found into meaningful sets of units (Yin, 2014). After these units were recognized, then the data was coded. I made segments of data using symbols, descriptive words, or category names (Yin, 2014). During this process, a master code list was made, and then I created sub-codes of new segments of data each time an appropriate segment was encountered (Yin, 2014).

The hand-coding process allowed intimate familiarity with the data to group trends among administrators who held different experiences. The research was analyzed and cross-referenced to gain a better understanding of how the school administrators deal with bullying. Trends were noted within each data collection instrument. The themes were noted from each instrument, recurring or overlapping from the other two data collection instruments. When different data points revealed similar information, then a confirmation was established.

In order to collect and analyze data, Giorgi (1994) noted that bracketing must be done. Bracketing means to place aside. Bracketing allows the describing of what had been perceived without interlacing one's theories, prior knowledge, and experiences with the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) described qualitative research as focused not on the interpretational lens of the researcher, but a transparent viewing of the participants' experience, which was achieved through bracketing.

According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing occurred when investigators set aside their individual experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination. Moustakas admitted that this state was seldom achieved with perfection. However, the procedure, illustrated by Moustakas, consisted of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's own experiences, and then collecting data from several participants who had experienced the phenomenon. The data for this research was analyzed by categorizing the information into similar statements or quotes and combining them into themes. I then developed a textual description of what the participants experienced and considered the conditions, situations, and context. A textual description was used to convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants.

In this study, I bracketed by taking low-inference notations of my personal opinions, explicitly writing down any notes about my thoughts, feelings, and reactions in a research journal before, during, and after each meeting, which helped me to ensure that I capture the facts as stated by the participant and differentiating them from my own biases.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation used multiple sources of data to verify research findings. At least three collection methods were implored to corroborate the findings on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Triangulation was a method to increase the strength of finding by cross-referencing multiple data sources that ensured information was accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three sources used were a semi-structured interview (with follow-up interviews when necessary), on-campus non-participant observation, and a focus group.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), there was a potential for researcher bias through the data collection. Triangulation was employed to address this bias. The semi-

structured interview was utilized to gather information about what participants thought about the topic. The questions were open-ended, allowing the researcher to ask additional questions in response to answers from the planned questions (Galletta, 2013). The semi-structured-interview and the focus group interview sought to gather similar information using two different approaches.

Yin (2014) said that focus groups were often paired with other data collection methods, such as interviews. The focus group allowed for different perspectives. A focus group allowed participants to hear each other and then add additional comments of agreement or disagreement (Patton 2015). The focus group gained or refined data missed from the individual interviews. The non-participant observation sought to confirm or refute any information gained from interviews and the focus group. The observation allowed the ability to determine if participants were congruent with their expressed views (Mulhall, 2003).

### **Trustworthiness**

The reliability of research implies that there is a measure of consistency and dependability (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness was achieved through both credibility and transferability techniques to the data analysis. Stake (1995) cautioned researchers against narrow thinking and suggested they understand their participants rather than imposing their assumptions. This study followed this concept through its use of multiple sources of data: interviews, an observation, and a focus group to decrease threats to credibility. This study used credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Yin (2014) echoed this when he stated that case studies should consist of tests such as construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) found member checking to be a critical technique for establishing credibility. Member checking was done in two ways. First, the participants were given the data analysis portion of the study for their review before any conclusions were developed. Second, the participants verified the accuracy of the interpretations of the data gathered (Creswell, 2013). After the interviews and follow-up interviews were transcribed, the participants were provided with copies, either electronically or in-person, based on their preference. I asked the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy and make corrections if needed. Any discrepancies noted by the participants were addressed at this time. Upon completion of the study, the same process was repeated to validate the study.

### **Credibility**

Research has credibility if the information is reported with integrity (Schwandt, 2007). Credibility was achieved through data triangulation. Creswell (2013) referred to this as gathering data using multiple methods to study a phenomenon. Triangulation is the utilization of three data sources to verify the dependability of the information (Schwandt, 2007).

Qualitative studies were often criticized for their apparent lack of credibility, so the researcher must devise reliability strategies and apply them to the research (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) suggested a minimum of three strategies for the documentation of the accuracy of a qualitative study. Here, the three triangulated strategies of observation, a focus group, and a semi-structured personal interview, were utilized. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the study's findings. Yin (2014) said that the use of multiple sources is a necessary element of the qualitative study. In collecting information from multiple sources, I believe the phenomenon of female adolescent relational aggression and administrator response was illuminated and provided rich sources of contextual data for analysis.

The use of audio-visual devices aided in credibility as it provided a detailed insight into the participant-interviewer interaction and ensured identical replication of content for analysis. (Mays, 1989). The researcher as an instrument adds credibility as Treece and Treece (1986) noted that an interviewer must know the subject otherwise important ramifications of the case would be missed. Smith (1975) said that focus group interviews were well suited as a methodology for the exploration of the beliefs and attitudes of participants. Gordon (1975) says that the semi-structured interview ensured that answers were given by the respondents themselves, which increased credibility. Observation as a method increased credibility by allowing the researcher to verify whether what people said was congruent with the reality on their campus (Muhall, 2002).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability emphasized the need for the study to account for the ever-changing context of the setting (Trochim, 2000). I noted any changes that occurred in the research setting. I did this by keeping a research journal that documented dates, locations, and pseudonyms to have an accurate chronology of gathered data which served as an audit trail to follow my decisions, actions, and rationale (Mulhall, 2002). A third-party peer was utilized to review the audit trail to ensure the appropriateness of the data (Schwandt, 2007).

Confirmability ensured that accurate data was collected during the study (Schwandt, 2007). Direct quotations were utilized to draw connections between the information and findings provided by each administrator that participated (Schwandt, 2007). The triangulation of data minimized skewing of the information obtained. I sought to ask interview questions in an objective way that did not appear to lead by either my facial features or my tone of voice.

## **Transferability**

Transferability is the ability to apply research findings to similar situations. This was accomplished through thick, rich descriptive data. This detailed data could be altered to apply to research elsewhere (Schwandt, 2007), which is what Yin (2014) called reliability, which emphasized the ability of a second researcher to be able to conduct the same study and arrive at similar findings and conclusions.

A chain of evidence was established by linking the conclusions of the case study back to the data, such as responses obtained from focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observation field notes (Yin, 2014). The reader examined specific details connected with the responses collected, the circumstances in which they were collected, and when and how they were collected. The case study data included observation field notes, transcribed and coded interview responses, and my research journal.

As far as applicability to another context, this study primarily focused on middle school administrators. It is recommended that a similar one be conducted with Elementary or High School administrators to see if the result would be similar or different.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Fair treatment of research subjects is an ethical issue in qualitative research throughout all phases of the research; there should be a sensitivity to ethical consideration (Creswell, 2013). These considerations include anonymity, confidentiality, and consent. The following procedures were implemented and followed: to ensure confidentiality, all individuals who played a role in the data collected were bound in writing to confidentiality. All participants signed a consent and were informed of their participation rights. The consent form stated that the participants reserved the right to skip questions or end their participation at any time without explanation.

For participant protection, pseudonyms were utilized to shield identity. Both electronic and hard copies of raw data were retained and concealed on a secure password-protected home laptop (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Files will be erased three years after this study.

The Thorn Rose Public Schools is among the largest districts in the state, consisting of 50 elementary schools. Participants for this study were from 10 of the 25 secondary schools listed on the district's website. An email request was sent to each eligible middle school administrator. The participants had a minimum of five years' experience as educators, which ensured they had enough information and experience that helped the researcher arrive at relevant conclusions and recommendations. Pseudonyms were utilized throughout this study to maintain the anonymity of both the campus and its administrator.

Once the email responses were received, 10 were selected from those who were interested. The researcher considered the gender and experience of the participant. Every effort was made to keep the selection even with five males and five females in hopes of curtailing the potential for gender biases. The researcher factored this potential by ultimately having three male and seven female participants and noted any trends in similarities or differences in their perceptions.

Within this process, the researcher contacted each selected candidate via phone to discuss participation. After obtaining a verbal or electronic consent to participate, the participants were contacted with an informed consent form to be signed and returned. The research was then conducted in the following sequence: scheduled individual interview, a campus observation, and then a focus group. All electronic data is kept on a password protected device. It will be erased three years after the completion of this study. All physical data collection was stored in a locked file cabinet and will be shredded three years after the completion of this study.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the design, questions, setting, participants, procedures, the role of the researcher, methods of data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were reviewed. This was a collective case study, which examined middle school administrator's perception of relational aggression. The use of a case study research methodology was imperative as it embedded multiple procedures through data-rich sources such as personal interviews, a direct non-participant observation, and a focus group. The data illuminated the phenomenon of administrators' perceptions of relational aggression and the academic and social impact on middle school girls. This study laid the foundation for presenting a detailed background of the problem, the related literature, description of the participants, and methodology. The next chapter presented the data and findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this case study was to examine administrator responses and experiences to the academic and social impact that relational aggression has on girls between sixth through eighth grade at Thorn Rose Public Schools (pseudonym). Select middle school administrators of the 25 secondary campuses of the Thorn Rose district were contacted according to purposeful criterion sampling to recruit participants. Of those contacted, 10 middle school administrators met the minimum qualifications of having five years of experience in education and agreed to be willing participants. Excerpts from data are used and presented in narrative form and a summary of all responses presented. Due to the significance of the potential impact of adolescent aggression on female middle school students' academic and social development, the findings from this case study sought to provide insight into these issues to help current and future administrators. The participants are all middle school administrators of an urban district who have dealt with various incidents of female aggression among their student body. The time spent with these participants allowed me to explore what these administrators experienced first-hand. The findings of this qualitative study are discussed as related to the three research questions: How middle school administrators describe relational aggression? How relational aggression impacts academic and social development? How an administrators' perception of the impact of relational aggression influence their response?

## **Participants**

Middle school administrators from Thorn Rose School District were recruited to participate in the study. Three were males and seven females, each had a minimum of five years' experience in education. Six participants were Caucasian, and four were African American. The diversity of gender, race, and geographical locations of the participants enhanced the validity of the study's findings. The following section provides a rich description of the individual participants, including brief biographical information about the campuses they serve. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect participant confidentiality.

### **Alan**

Alan is a White male administrator in early forties. He has years of experience, and his assistant principals go on to lead their own campuses after a short time under his leadership. Alan like most administrators was a busy person, and well respected. He often was called upon to lead professional development in and outside of the district on various topics in educational leadership. In addition to his work as a middle school principal, he taught aspiring principals at a local university part-time.

I was excited to speak with Alan because I knew that he would have a lot of experience in working with students and other administrators. So, I expected that he would have a broad view of this topic. To my surprise, though he is an administrator, Alan seemed to primarily view the topic through the lens of his own fatherhood. Alan was enthusiastically interested in this topic as he has "a young daughter who will soon be entering middle school." He expressed his concern for her "ability to navigate through adolescents in today's world." Alan explained:

I think a lot of our students, their homes lives, are not good. There's not a whole lot of adults monitoring them at home. And so, I think they're left on their own a lot, or maybe

they're watching a sibling and I mean, 'what do you do?' And you come home and get on social media parents are scared to just tell their kid 'no.' Like I told my daughter, you will never have Snapchat. I won't say that she will never have Facebook, but she'll never have Snapchat.

Alan did not like SnapChat because a bully could hide behind a disappearing message with no proof that it was ever sent. One thing that really stood out in my time with Alan was his analogy of dealing with female bullying. He said, "SnapChat is my kryptonite." It was an extraordinary phrase for someone that others within the district viewed as a superman among administrators.

### **Barbra**

Barbra is an African American female administrator in her late forties who has been in education for over two decades. Most of her experience has been with urban inner-city schools. In her current role, she oversees a campus that has only one grade level, seventh grade. She has one assistant principal and a counselor who were all founding members of that campus. Though Barbara is a strong woman with an even stronger personality she was initially reluctant to do the interview. She also has a reserved personality until called to action. At first she was guarded in her responses but quickly became comfortable after the first few questions. She shared insights from her experience as an administrator and as a mother who has no daughters.

Though Barbra's school is not an all-boys school, her campus is mostly male and her own two children are also males. She noted that there was a similarity in how she observed boys and girls handling conflict, at least on her campus. Her girls handled conflict the same way her boys did, physically. Barbra noted:

Most of my girls fight physically. One of my girls who I mean she boxes and things like this. So, this girl fights. She is my best fighter. She can hold her own against male or

female. She, at the beginning of the year, was showing aggression towards other girls who would look at her, if she thought or perceived the look was incorrect.

Barbra also viewed this topic from her own experience, as a young female student with the experience of being a victim of bullying herself. “I hope to empower my students in ways that I myself was not.” One thing that really stood out speaking to Barbra was her strong belief that despite the best effort of adults to build esteem, many teens hold to an “identity defined by their peers.” She noted how her own mom would try to tell her that she was beautiful and wonderful, but when her peers said the opposite, for some reason those words carried more weight. Barbara stated:

But I know as parents, we always try to tell our kids you know, if people don't like you, it's okay, because you are a likable person and they are missing out. It's their loss. So, you try to empower your kids to have high self-esteem. But when they get with their peers, some of that kinda goes out the window, even with kiddos who come in fully knowing who they are. At this age, no matter who they are, honestly they are defined by what their peers see as acceptable. So, when they are receivers or givers of aggression, it completely um... reshapes the brain of these children. So, their self-esteem tanks whether they admit it or not.

### **Grace**

Grace is a White female administrator in her sixties. She put me in the mind of my grandmother. She was so sweet and soft-spoken. When I came for the interview, though I only met her once or twice before, she had open arms and a smile, like she had known me my entire life. When I walked in, she had a student in her office who was making up a test from the day

before. Even though she was not his teacher she wanted him to have a quiet place to concentrate to do his best. He had just finished when we began our conversation.

Grace has a counseling background and it becomes clear that this was her primary lens for viewing the topic. Though she is a principal she consistently wears her counselor's hat. Her and her assistant principal, an African American male were both school counselors in the district before coming to this campus as administrators. They had been at this campus together for over two decades. She said, "He and I have a real clear decision about what we agree on. We don't argue about much after 20 years. We are like an old married couple when it comes to taking care of our students."

Grace said, "Young girls, in general, have a difficult time figuring out which group they want to belong to, and which would accept them." She says, "For me, it's like girls are always bouncing around trying to see where they fit in." Grace believed that students should always have a social group, to feel connected and that students were more vulnerable when people did not feel that they were connected. She believed that everyone should belong to three groups total to be successful. Grace said:

So, they should have three support groups. Scouts used to be something, church groups used to be something, band used to be something. And right now, my kids are only part of my school. And they don't know if they fit in my school because it's two grades with no sports and most don't go to a church.

### **Debra**

Debra is an African American administrator in her mid to late forties. She was full of energy and passion. She talked fast and moved at a brisk pace. She took me on a tour of her

campus, though she was wearing heels and I was wearing sneakers; I had a difficult time keeping up with her. We visited every part of the two-story campus in what seemed like a few minutes.

Debra's school is on the south side of town, (predominantly White) unlike most of the schools in the district which are on the northside (predominantly of Color). The northside schools were known for being more challenging academically and behaviorally. Debra's school was known for having slightly higher academic achievement than some of the counterpart schools, but they were not exempt from concerns with bullying at Madison.

Debra was the school's founding assistant principal and eventually became the campus's current principal. The founding principal was White and so were most of the teachers and students. Debra was now leading a school that did not look like her. This itself was unique for an area of town that has a historical racist past against African Americans.

Debra has a gift for building relationships with all types of people and helping them to find common ground. She expressed being a big believer in the use of TRIBES and other personality inventory programs. When students know themselves, they are more secure and less likely to bully. Speaking from a student's point of view, Debra said:

When I'm secure in myself and realize who I am and understand that you and I, we both have our strengths, we both have our weaknesses, there's advantages to being who I am and disadvantages, there are some advantages and disadvantages to being who you are, when I come to terms with that I'm less likely to do some of the things that happen when people are insecure. And I don't have to project an anger and I don't have to project a jealousy with you.

Debra makes a lot of effort to help her students understand the danger of being mean-spirited in conversation and action. She wants all her students to feel safe and secure coming to school.

Debra said that her biggest concern was that someone would suffer in silence as she did as a student. She noted the incidents of death by suicide that occurred because “students had no one to confide in.” She stressed the importance of students “feeling safe enough to report any bullying issues.” She said, “I decided to put my Counselor’s office on the opposite end of the building from mine because I do not want students to be seen reporting bullying to the main office.” She believed that students should have anonymity when reporting to minimize any “incidents of retaliation.”

### **Harold**

Harold is a young African American principal in his early thirties who has a good report with his students overall. It was obvious from the campus visit that his students loved him, they often came up to express their appreciation for his being there. Girls gave side hugs and boys gave high-fives. Harold’s school was a tough school with a lot of turn over and he was a stabilizing force, but he still had a lot on his plate to turn the school around.

I had to meet with Harold at a local restaurant near his campus. His school was so busy that we could only meet off-campus to ensure that there would be no interruptions. I did get to visit the campus for the observation though and see first-hand how busy it can become. Talking with Harold, it was clear that he was frustrated with the weight of being a first-year school leader in dealing with these issues. His office was a revolving door of female bullying issues. He felt that he spent most of his time dealing with this one issue. He expressed, “I see no end in sight of bullying for my campus.” Harold said:

When I think about it. My issue usually is involving young ladies. And it's usually over a young man. It speaks volumes. I think my young ladies feel like they must compete for the attention of males. I don't know if that's a good thing for males in their lives or males

overall. It's almost like they are conditioned that way. But it's almost to. They must downplay someone else. To kind of catapult their esteem.

He was excited to be a part of sharing what he has experienced and is hopeful to learn something that might help his campus. Most of the issues he dealt with were surrounding female drama over males.

### **Vanessa**

Vanessa is a European American woman in her mid-to-late sixties with strong views from her own familiar upbringing overseas. Vanessa categorizes herself as a good person, that is “non-religious, but tries to do right by everyone.” She is very strong in her political views and thinks that the current Administration only amplifies the issues that schools face with addressing bullying.

Vanessa is a proud feminist and is very vocal about her views. She feels that the country was not ready for a female president because many people do not like strong assertive women, like herself. We had to reschedule the initial interview, as the first time we meet she spent most of our time expressing her views on how “males misunderstand strong females as being aggressive.” Regardless of any truth to that statement, it was outside of the scope of my research topic. So, we had to recalibrate and then we had a nice meeting once we were on the same page.

My interview with Vanessa was full of passion. She identified with young girls and wants to see them empowered. Though she recognizes that some girls can be aggressive bullies, she says, “many girls are misunderstood as being aggressive by a male-dominated society who doesn't want to hear their voice.” Vanessa felt that if current President could tone down his rhetoric then it would help students to be less aggressive than they have become since he took

office. She has not seen it as bad as it has become recently. As she reflected on the current political climate and the students she served. Vanessa said:

People jumping to conclusions, people not assuming positive intent. Um. People immediately going to their anger finding that anger and going to it and then not really wanting to be reasonable. I mean, I think we live in a country where people really wanna be angry. We kind of celebrate anger here. So. Um. And if you can get kids to breathe, and just kind of think logically then sometimes you can work through it. But immediately. I've been reading this book about trauma in schools and it talks about learning in the brain and talks about kind of the reptilian brain and the human brain. And immediately, we go to that kind of frontal lobe or I mean the reptilian part of our brain immediately that's where we go. And I see that happening. But immediately we're angry.

### **Zachary**

Though he was not the first to be interviewed, Zachary was the first to confirm willingness to participate in the study. Zachary is an African American administrator in his mid-forties with a passion for athletics. He is new to the district but has been an administrator and coach for many years. Zachary is a sports enthusiast and constantly uses sports analogies to describe his experience in dealing with bullying. He says, “the biggest issue with bullies is they do not know how to be team players and do what is right for the common good.”

Zachary has a laid-back personality but doesn't hold back on his personal use of profanity though he tries to keep it to a whisper when students are around. Zachary is principal at one of the most challenging schools in the district. It has the lowest attendance rate in the district. Over half of the students are in a credit recovery program due to failure to complete courses.

Zachary was recruited by district leadership from another district to come and lead Van Buren Middle School. Zachary has enrolled his own son at the school, but not his daughter. He sent her to one of the more upscale schools in the city. As he reflected on the issue of female aggression Zachary said that he has the same issues with his own daughter and didn't want her to be apart of it here. Reflecting on a possible contributing factor Zachary said:

The difference is just that they watch reality TV now. The fighting. Throwing a drink in the face, the calling of someone a bitch. All that's acceptable today. I mean, the girls even call each other that. "Bitch, please!" Stuff like that. Well, my daughter her best friend and her they talk like that.

### **Elaine**

It was initially surprising that an elderly White female would be tasked with running an alternative campus of students who are mostly of color. I had been used to seeing a strong Black male in this role. However, after spending some time with her I could see why she was a great fit. Elaine is a feisty elderly woman that dresses with current fashion. Though she is old enough to be a grandmother or great grandmother to most of her students she understood their language and lingo. Elaine loves to read and makes a great effort to stay current. Not just on the culture of her students, but on what is the cutting edge in educational practice. She recommended books to me effortlessly, even as she talked.

Elaine has served in many capacities in her four decades of education. She has been a teacher, counselor, district office employee, assistant principal, and a campus principal. She was on the founding team of two separate campuses. She was a trainer of the program TRIBES which she still implements in her schools to build relationships with her students.

Elaine was welcoming when I asked her to consider being in my study. She said that she was an open book and so was her school. Talking with her was like having a chat with an old friend. She spoke so freely and didn't have to do a lot of reflecting when she was asked a question. She spoke from years of experience in working with young people. Elaine has built some great systems in place for her school. She has a team of assistant principals and counselors who all had clearly defined roles. Everyone seemed to know their place and she ran her school with a quiet tone.

It because of bullying behaviors that many students are placed on Elaine's campus. Her school consists of small class sizes and low teacher-student ratios. Students at Elaine's school have access to individual and group counseling. The value that she places on the need for students to have counseling for their behavior issues was evident. She said, "students who feel inconsequential or unimportant, become aggressive, to be seen. So, we have to let them know we see them and hear them."

### **Velma**

Velma is a White female administrator in her mid-to-late fifties. Most of her career has been as a Physical Education Teacher, then as a campus administrator for various campuses within the district. For the past three years, Velma has worked at prestigious schools with high academic and parental support. This is Velma's first year at Tyler middle school, an alternative school, though she has been in education for many years. Velma came from a large high performing high school within the district where she served as an assistant principal. This school at which she now serves as lead principal is small and the students are encouraged to apply when they are not successful academically or behaviorally at their home campus. Many of Velma's female students have issues with bullying behavior.

Velma loves to help her students work through issues. She says it comes from her coaching background. Her office is one of the largest I had ever seen for an administrator's office. The room at one time was two rooms, but a wall had been removed to enlarge this space. There was a single small conference table right in the center. When I asked about this unique set up, she told me "this is where the problems are worked out."

Velma noted in her experience that female aggression starts in adolescence but continues into adulthood. She admitted that she herself could address the issue because she herself was involved in this type of behavior as an adolescent and still observe it in her adult relationships. Velma said:

There is a struggle that even adult females have with the name-calling. There is a power struggle between females. Let alone trying to push through the Glass Ceiling to get in more powerful positions, so-called powerful positions, leadership positions. It makes me wonder how much, and I'll be honest. I'm sure I know I've done it. I can't think of a specific example, but I've known that I've called other women in power positions names. The 'B' word. So, how much of that unfortunate modeling are we showing to our young females?

### **Daisy**

Daisy is a White female administrator in her mid-to-late forties. Her views on many topics are out of the mainstream on many topics. Daisy is a matter-of-fact person that says exactly what she means rather it is agreed with or not. She said that some ethnicities are more prone to bullying than others. "And I think the plotting and the scheming you could break it down with ethnicities a little bit too. Certain people seem to just be more upfront, whereas others are more manipulators and that type of thing." Daisy had worked at a school that was

predominantly White until her most recent assignment working with an alternative school with students of color.

Daisy was unique among all the administrators in the study as she felt that any girl who claimed to be bullied just had a “victim mentality and need to get over it.” Often her views diverged greatly from that of the other administrators in this study. Daisy has two teenage daughters. One of the first things she said, “My own daughters cannot be bullied. They are not allowed to have a victim mentality.”

Daisy has been an administrator in the district for many years but is also new to her current campus. Daisy has a strong no-nonsense approach to life, and it becomes evident in her response to this topic. She felt that boys were the real issue and not girls. Daisy expressed:

Usually, if there's something super-duper aggressive, that happens to another student in the school usually it's a group of boys it's bad if it's really ugly. But girls, whatever they're doing themselves. However, more than what other people in middle school, they super-duper care a lot about what others think and if they're fitting in and who they're fitting in with. My own daughter. She deals with it and she says. She hangs out with boys at lunch because it's not that backbiting that she says happens with the girls.

Daisy believed “girls that are abused, put themselves in precarious situations for that to happen again because that's what they've identified. So, I think if therapeutically we could help these kids see that they are not a victim.” At times it was personally difficult to listen to Daisy’s views, but it did help me to understand that there are many perspectives and experiences with this topic.

## Results

### Theme Development

This study sought to investigate the experience with adolescent aggression of 10 middle school administrators. The development of themes began with a cross-case analysis to determine commonalities. The three data collection instruments were designed to mirror one another as they each sought the same information. The analysis of the semi-structured interview, non-participant observation, and the focus group were examined individually and then cross-case.

Listed in the next section is a cross-case analysis, which was framed through the administrators' experience, impact, and response to relational aggression. This analysis includes administrators' experiences with adolescent aggression, the impact adolescent aggression has had on their campuses and the administrators' response to relational aggression.

Data was collected, recorded, and transcribed. The data was read multiple times then colored highlighters were utilized for noting themes and trends in the information. Hand-coding was done by laying out interview transcripts and observation notes and highlighting quotes of participants with different colors. Codes were grouped from all participants to formulate themes. Any codes that were only applicable to a few participants were not selected as themes.

From the individual case-summaries emerged the following six themes: Skillset Deficiencies, Characteristics of Aggression, Climate Impact, Esteem, Lack of Education, and Attempted Solutions. The following themes aim to support the understanding of middle school administrators' response to adolescent aggression. Below are some paraphrases and quotes that have been extracted from a focus group, semi-structured interview, and an observation with participants that depict the themes around administrator experience.

**Skillset Deficiencies.** All the participants in my study collectively described relational aggression as a skillset deficiency from the home among students. They felt that it should be addressed in the home, but since it clearly wasn't then it was their responsibility as educational leaders to address it at the school level. Barbra said that the number one role on her campus was "to ensure that students had the overall skills for success."

Barbra told her teachers: Let's help students create social, academic, and self-management skills so they can be successful in and through school when they leave here. It's how I see our role. We must teach these skills.

All participants mentioned a lack of communication skills among their students. Poor communication skillset was a hindrance to healthy relationships among female students. Concerning these relationships, Zachary said, "Students lack skillset! Elaine echoed a similar sentiment in her interview when she said, "I think from a young age, some girls learn to be aggressive. They don't know, sometimes, the skills and maturity aspects of life."

As noted, a deficiency of communication skills in the home was noted by many of the administrators. Though students learn to read and write at school, they learn their core communication skillset from their home environment. Daisy said:

So, I think some of the kids that are showing this aggression, not all, but I would say most that I've seen usually don't have the communication skills from home; they usually do not have the confidence from home or the support from home.

Tarsha agreed that the school must begin to address this skillset deficiency. Tarsha said:

So, the children we have in middle school right now are going to be parents eventually. And so, if we do not fix it and get them with those skills so that they can raise children themselves, then it perpetuates what we have now.

One of the hindrances to addressing this skill is the manner in which students communicate outside of school. Many students don't know how to communicate with each other face-to-face because it's all done behind a keyboard now. Two students can text each other while sitting on a couch next to each other instead of engaging in a traditional conversation. Students can say whatever they want behind a keyboard, but then they get in front of somebody, and they struggle to put together a sentence. Or they can't verbally express themselves, because they are used to speaking in text. This may have a lot to do with students not being able to communicate with each other to solve a conflict, or to get through problems that they're having.

Alan said, "with the prevalence of social media, students receive fewer person-to-person interactions, which hinders their interpersonal communication skill development." Grace agreed that some children on her campus particularly struggled with interpersonal communication skills due to social media when she said, "a bullied child becomes a shadow child, and when they are in a personal conversation of conflict, even with a non-bully; those children tend to avoid it at all costs because they lack the skill." The participants expressed that if they were going to address aggression between students, then they must teach them coping skills at school.

**Characteristics of relational aggression.** The participants noted that initial experience with relational aggression began with the difficulty of defining the term itself. Vanessa said, "I think that the term is misused all the time." Barbara agreed, "the term is overused." With all the talk of bullying in the media, parents, and students are sensitive to this topic. Administrators agree that often students and parents called events "bullying" which didn't meet the school policy's threshold or the law's definition. For example, at Zachary's school one student was told in the cafeteria by peers that she couldn't dance. She told the principal that by saying this to her, she was being bullied.

One characteristic that each administrator agreed on was that relational aggression was best defined as continuous behavior. Valarie gave an example: “Bullying is a pattern of behavior while harassment is a single incident.” And that’s where we must educate our faculty, our students, and our parents. Alan agreed that relational aggression is continuous when he said, “In my experience, relational aggression is a persistent and repeated behavior. Students who bullied often went back and forth and ‘created beef’ continually with an individual or group.”

Another significant characteristic was in the word “relational” itself. Administrators acknowledge experiencing the relational nature of aggression. Daisy said that ‘withholding friendship’ was the most prevalent characteristic of relational behavior among girls. Daisy said:

Girls identified themselves by their friends: How many they had? The type of friends they had. And their friendship dynamics. It was not only what they were doing, but it was also just as important, *with whom* they were doing it.

Debra agreed to say, at my school, “there were constant shifts in relationships.” She recounted a student who said, “If I add a friend, then I cannot remain friends with my current friends.” These sentiments agree with the Relational Cultural Theory which says female students place high value on their relationship network.

**Climate Impact.** The relational nature of aggression impacts both the academic and the social climate for students who are victims of bullying. Administrators said that they were tasked with the responsibility of fostering and protecting the environment of learning and safety. Elaine said, “A building’s climate is felt and must be guarded. Climate is paramount. When students are angry, antsy, or frustrated, administrators must respond to that. Principals are there to help them feel respected and cared for.” Each principal acknowledged that this was a huge challenge for them. Alan said,

The impact of bullying at my school caused distractions to student learning. These distractions came via phone and other electronic devices through bullies who were on social media, bullying others during class time. It is difficult to concentrate on academics when you are getting a text from a bully.

Some aggressors isolated victims that were perceived as weak, and as a result, attendance and academics declined for many victims. The aggressors intimidated others and became mad if a person or group did not admire or fear them. Barbra said, “Bullies get so wrapped up in their aggression towards others that they throw academics to the wind. The aggressor’s achievement decreases, and the victims’ academics dwindle also.” Bullies are successful because they can often hide their identity behind social media. Valarie noted one girl that received messages telling her to “go kill yourself” via text while she was in class. This text was untraceable as it came from an app that hides the number.

However, when bullies are caught, a potential retaliation can disrupt the learning environment. Many endured their bullies and did not report bullying, for fear of the retaliation. Some victims began to miss school because of their bullies. Grace said, “Relational Aggression impeded academic learning on my campus. Victimized students avoided proximity and collaboration with aggressive peers. Even to the point of missing class.”

Some principals said that relational aggression had shut down academics completely for some of their students as being bullied was constantly on their minds. Speaking as a student, Debra said, “When in fear mode or a threatening mode, my mind is still thinking about that. If I am insulted in the hall, then, when I am in class, it is still on my mind.”

According to Elaine, “for some students, bullying caused emotional trauma and embarrassment. For these students, learning became irrelevant, they just wanted to get back to

feeling safe.” Barbra said, “Relational aggression was an academic killer.” Because that's all that students would think about. Harold said:

We say a teacher's time is sacred and valuable; and so is instructional time for students.

Imagine being told to leave your baggage at the door, but at the same time, some of the people responsible for your baggage are in the same class that you are in.

Vanessa agreed with Harold and said, “Aggressive behavior interfered because students spent much time sorting through it. Schools focus a lot on academics, but not enough on the hindrances to those academics.”

Attendance was also impacted. Students wanted to avoid relational aggression. It followed them home with social media but being absent meant they didn't have to physically see their aggressor daily. Zachary said, “It stops a kid from coming to school. Attendance numbers went down this year because victims were tired of the comments and the bullying.” Attendance became sporadic. “We had this with at least one girl this year. She avoided classes because of bullies. Of course, that impacted her grades.” Elaine said:

“Students cannot learn academically until the school has dealt with their social-emotional needs, which include their relationships.” She added, “That is also true for adults too. I do not have a good day with issues in my head. Academic excellence is impossible if the brain is not in an emotionally calm place to learn.”

Students who were impacted emotionally by their bullies had a difficult time with schoolwork. They could not concentrate on it. The administrators expressed a need to deal with the social emotional wellbeing of students as a part of a protected school climate. Velma confirmed Elaine's position when she said, “One young lady left our high-achieving middle school because she was bullied.” Daisy, as usual, differed from all the other principals when she said:

Relational aggression has minimal influence on academic progress. Socioeconomics was the primary cause of any academic issues, and those who were bullied had no communication skill set, they lacked in confidence, and their ethnicity played a part. Some people seem more upfront, more manipulative naturally, but aggression did not impede academics more than other factors.

Daisy didn't feel that it was her responsibility to protect the school's climate, it was up to the individual to protect themselves. She was alone in this perspective. The other administrators agreed that it was their responsibility to respond to the impact on their campuses.

**Esteem.** Relational aggression had a direct correlation on student esteem. Elaine said, "Esteem is everything with this age group. They must wear the right clothing, act the right way, be in the right friend group." One administrator, Harold, said it poetically, "They lacked the confidence within themselves, to be themselves because they were trying to find themselves." No one wants to be the kid picked last in kickball. It is human nature, the need to feel accepted and included. As Elaine said, "Feeling accepted was very important for this age group." Exclusion stamps the student as 'not worthy' and not good enough to be a part of the social group.

Alan said, "Some students came to school with low self-esteem already, but relational aggressive bullying causes it to exacerbate. Both the bully and the victim have low self-esteem, but the bullies had the lowest self-esteem because they hide behind their aggression."

Adults try to empower students to have esteem, but when they get with their peers that message is not always retained. Barbra said, "relational aggression impacted a student's esteem and self-worth. It allowed them to be defined by their peers, regardless of what parents and teachers had said to them." She found that peer compliments and insults carried more weight

than those of adults. Barbra recalled her own mother trying to build her up and tell her how beautiful she thought she was, but her friends' opinions just seemed to be more impactful on her esteem.

The administrators agreed that esteem impacted both the bully and the victim, but that it impacted the bully differently. The impact of esteem took the victim and bully out of character. There was usually a subtle notice in the change of their behavior. They became quiet if bullied or became loud or aggressive if they were the bully. Barbra attempted to identify the reasons why bullies did what they did. Barbra said:

I think they bully to numb themselves, and I think that they want to cause others to feel their pain. I think they are unable to express their emotions with words. Perhaps, it helps them to be able to feel better or they wanted others to feel as bad as they did.

People need positivity spoken to them to believe in themselves and have a sense of community. Some adults in their lives have not even spoken positively to students at home or school. For some, bullying was simply competing for attention, and for others, it was competing to be relevant. Harold said, "it is hard even for adults to have high esteem if they are experiencing relational aggression." He recalled the words of one of his students, "I have to put you down to lift me. My only value is to take yours."

Vanessa believed that the impact of low esteem was that victims felt alone and isolated. She said, "We are social creatures. We must be a community, evolutionarily speaking, but it is difficult to be a community when others are being aggressive."

**Lack of Education.** One thing that became abundantly clear almost from the start was that none of the administrators felt that they had been adequately trained to address the issue of female aggression on their campuses. The training received dealt more with improving adult to

student interaction than supporting student-to-student interaction. Alan said, “We had training in *Restorative Conversations*.” Barbra said, “We had *Social-Emotional Learning* training.” Daisy said, “The PD from the district on *Restorative Practice* has been the best.”

Many of the administrators felt that they had to become self-taught as it related to dealing with relational aggression. Zachary said, “I went to training and read books on my own.” Grace said, “I have a fifteen-year counseling background. I put that hat on. I also read all the time.” Elaine said, “Most of my training in this area was through the National Middle School Conferences, not the district.”

The district did provide training using *Restorative Practice* models. The restorative justice became time-consuming and impractical for some administrators. Harold said, “This required me doing mediations; it seemed like I did 10 a week, and eight of those were with girls that I would have to see again the next week. It was an ongoing thing. It doesn’t work.” Barbra said, “some girls would get in trouble just so they could come and have a restorative conversation as it gave them a time to talk.”

**Attempted Solutions.** The participants were solutions-minded individuals. Though they all admitted they had limited resources or support from the district, they still had a plan of response for the students they served. They all had school-wide assemblies known as forums, with guest speakers. Alan said, “but I think the programs did not have any impact.” Students heard the message, but they did not internalize it.” Known bullies were heard saying, “This forum must be about someone else because that is not me.” Grace echoed a similar statement, “I do not have an anti-bullying program. We have had guest speakers, but children do not pay attention to them.”

Barbra felt that there needed to be a strong focus on the adult response. She didn’t want her staff to exacerbate any bullying situations. She said, “We just took each case as it came to

us. My assistant principal and I learned to deescalate the issues.” Barbra believed that students could be taught by adults how to modify their behavior. “Mostly, we did team building activities to teach bullies how to be friendly. We tried to help our bullies to become friendlier.” Upon observation, Grace was one of two leaders to have any anti-bullying posters throughout her school. Grace, a former counselor encouraged her students to talk to their teachers about bullying. Debra said:

Students are encouraged to slip notes to their teachers or under a counselor’s door. We have not used any anti-bullying curriculum. We showed one video per semester that began the conversation with our students about this topic. We got them off the internet. We also have some posters. This is the extent of our bullying program.

Harold said that as it relates to bullying, “every adult in my building is responsible for reporting what they have seen, even cafeteria workers and janitors. If the report comes to any administrator or adult they immediately become responsible.” As for anti-bullying programs on the campus, he did not use them. He said, “Bullying has been here, and it will be here!” Like Barbra, Harold said, “We addressed bullying case-by-case when it came.” He said, “We always address the bully, but we need a plan to address and empower these victims.”

Zachary said that his deans were tasked with handling issues with relational aggression. This was conducted through restorative conversations. As for anti-bullying programs on his campus, Zachary said, “I have not used any programs other than saying, ‘Do not bully!’ Our teachers talked about it in their classes, and our administration discussed it in the Forums, but that is all.”

Elaine said that she had a counselor and a therapist who were ready to assist. Upon observation, the staff was stationed in the halls always observing. As for anti-bullying programs

on the campus, they did not use any specific program. They used a variety of strategies. Elaine was a proponent of TRIBES. She used to be a trainer. She used community circles to build relationships. The environment was very structured. The school was so structured it would be difficult to be aggressive unless done on a social media platform.

Velma said that her campus was a fishbowl. Nothing went too long without being noticed. The students often self-reported, especially if it regarded social media. Often, students reported it to the office before telling their parents. “As for anti-bullying programs on the campus, there are none, but our campus does the two required videos. One each semester. We do need a more robust approach.”

Students were escorted by their teachers from class to class. The environment was structured, but a fight did break out in a classroom between two females who were in a yelling match. The administrator ran down to address it. It was the overflow of a social media conversation the night before.

Many times, adults forget what it was like to be a middle school student. Daisy had her staff at the beginning of the year, take time to reflect on their experiences to work on their empathy. Restorative conversations were the main way to address this issue at her campus. Any continued misbehavior resulted in dismissal from the school.

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of my study was to understand the experience of middle school administrators in responding to the issues of adolescent aggression. The central question driving the study was: How do middle school administrators describe relational aggression? The answer to this question is viewed through the experience of the administrators interviewed.

**How do middle school administrators describe relational aggression (female bullying)?** The research question above was designed to explore how middle school administrators describe relational aggression. Administrators describe relational aggression differently than parents and students, who tend to see isolated events as bullying. Administrators see relational aggression as “a persistent and repeated behavior.” A defining characteristic of relational aggression begins with the term itself. Most administrators believed that the term was misused and often overused. Students and parents called certain events “bullying” which didn’t meet the school’s threshold or the law’s definition. Relational aggression is a continuous pattern of behavior, not a single isolated incident. Alan gives an example using cyberbullying. “It moves from one student to another, but it continues.” He noted, “with girls, it’s never done. Social media is non-stop! Weekend social media bullying comes to campus on Monday morning.”

Barbra describes relational aggression as being an overt behavior that usually went unnoticed by many adults. It could happen in the bathrooms, at the bus stop, or near a locker. She described bullying as “invading someone’s space with intimidation.” She gives the example of “bumping into people or using threatening language toward them to cause fear or angst.”

Administrators described relational aggression as a skillset deficiency among their students. One administrator felt that her number one role was to ensure that students had the overall skills for relational success. She helped students create social, academic, and management skills so they could be successful in and through school. It’s how she came to envision her role.

They noticed that poor skillsets were a hindrance to healthy relationships among peers. One principal said, “aggressive students often lacked the ability to downshift emotionally.” So,

it was difficult for some students to handle their emotions and they tended to become aggressive quickly when upset. Administrators described relational aggression as synonymous with the lack of basic communication skills from home.

**How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied?** Another question guiding my research dealt with the impact of relational aggression on bullied female students. Victims face a variety of issues both academically and socially. These issues had an impact on the schools' overall climate and student individual esteem.

One impact of relational aggression was the distraction to students' academic progress. One such distraction comes from inappropriate uses of electronic devices during class time. Students can become obsessed with checking social media, which may contain cyberbullying. The impact that relational aggression had on academic progress was that bullies got so wrapped up in their aggression towards others that they just threw academics to the wind. The aggressors did not achieve, and the victim's grades dwindled. Students who were bullied tended to isolate themselves and their attendance and academics declined.

According to Grace, "some students missed school, because of bullies." She noted a student who had good attendance until she began to report issues with another female student. Soon, these excessive absences impacted her academic standing in the class. Upon thinking like a student Debra said:

Bullying shuts academics down completely. When in fear mode or feeling threatened, my mind is still thinking about that. If I am insulted in the hall, in class, it is still on my mind. With emotional trauma and embarrassment, my learning becomes irrelevant.

Teaching time is sacred, and so is instructional time. Harold said, "It's hard to leave baggage at that door when those responsible are in the room. It's an academic killer."

Not only are academics impacted indirectly by relational aggression, but it can also stunt social development. Vanessa said, "...that probably is why some adults get mad at a stop sign and shoot someone. They didn't develop socially. They haven't figured out how to work things out." Students don't know that they can't control the people around them. All students need to develop socially, but aggressive students can negatively impact this development among their peers.

Another impact on social development within negative peer relationships was that victims tended to isolate themselves. Instead of going to the lunchroom, they went to the media center/library. They stayed long in the restroom or made frequent trips to the restroom to avoid the aggressive peer.

Socially, the bully doesn't know how to sit and interact with people without being a bully. They never learned how to properly socialize with others. Another impact on social development in peer relationships was that victims became ostracized by an individual or a group.

**How does a middle school administrator's perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response?** Another guiding question of my study dealt with how the administrators' perception of the impact, influenced their response? Daisy was the only administrator that had a "don't be a victim" approach. She said, "my own girls are not allowed to tell me that they are bullied. They are not allowed to be victims." Daisy's approach was that the victim carries a measure of the

blame. Everyone else held a more sympathetic view of the victims. They simply expressed being overwhelmed by the situation and powerless to respond in a meaningful and lasting way.

Administrators felt as though they lacked the proper education, but attempted solutions anyway. The middle school administrators in this study seemed to be overwhelmed with this issue. One administrator comparing himself to superman said that dealing with SnapChat had become his kryptonite. Harold expressed his perception of feeling overwhelmed when he said, “Aggressors are constantly trying to make themselves higher than others, fighting for attention, I probably should not say this, but bullies don’t tend to change. It’s an ongoing problem!”

The administrators all held strong opinions as to why bullying was happening and what could be done to address it. They each felt inadequately prepared by the district and their educator programs and felt that they were own their own to respond to it.

Alan noted, “we have had Forums and guest speakers to respond to these issues, but I don’t think these programs have had a significant impact. Students hear the message, but they do not internalize it.” Harold said, “We have Restorative Conversations, which helps adults to build a relationship with students, but we don’t talk a lot about the student-to-student relationships.”

Some administrators expressed the perception that the external counter messages were very difficult to overcome. Harold said, “students are exposed to more these days than their parents. The messages in social media, music lyrics, and tv ads are becoming increasingly more difficult to counter.” He also said, “there is a lack of love in many homes, so students come to school with lots of hate, and it comes out as bullying.” It becomes imperative for the school to show students that they are cared for at school.

Other administrators decided they had a choice. They could make it better or worse by how they handled the incidents that they addressed. Barbra said, “We learn to deescalate and not

exacerbate situations.” When I ask kids, “why they do the things they do, and what’s going on?” Sometimes kids don’t know. They can’t accept that they’re doing anything wrong. “Mostly we do team building activities to teach them how to be friendly. We try to help them be friendlier.”

It also seemed that female relational aggression had becoming more physical over time. It used to be just words, now they are getting physical. Elaine said, “Boys are even hitting girls. I don’t know if boys are more aggressive or if the girls are becoming so aggressive that boys are starting to fight back. Girls are also fighting each other physically.” Zachary said:

We need to teach teaming. Boys who play sports are used to coming together for the team. Girls who don’t play sports don’t get a lot of teaming. I think it could help relationships if girls are taught teaming. We must teach them to work together.

### **Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to present the themes based on the data collection of 10 administrators’ experience with adolescent aggression. As I started, I described the participants who I recruited for the study. The data was collected from a focus group, semi-structured interviews, and campus observation which were cross-case analyzed for emerging themes. Each theme was developed through the lens of the participants’ perception of experience, impact, and response to relational aggression. The data was grouped into themes based on participant commonalities to arrive at the core experience of how middle school administrators respond to female aggression.

The findings of this study indicated that adolescent students lacked the social skills to resolve issues of conflict. Often aggressive students would communicate via social media, which allowed them to hide behind a keyboard instead of having face-to-face confrontations. The administrators felt that their major role, in addition to campus academic development, was to

support students in their social and emotional development. This is a skill set that most administrators felt were lacking in the school and in the home.

The participants described the characteristics of relational aggression as being verbal and physical. Some aggressive behavior was verbal in that students often would name-call, spread rumors, use profanity, or use derogatory and threatening language. At other times it was physical in the form of pushing, shoving, fighting, or using the body's proximity to intimidate. Another characteristic is that most of the aggressive behavior was done via social media. Aggressors used various applications, namely SnapChat. Administrators agreed that SnapChat caused issues with investigations because it was untraceable.

The administrators noticed that relational aggression had an impact on their campuses' climates. Victims tended to throw academics to the wind. It was difficult for many of them to co-exist in a class in which their aggressor was also enrolled. This caused issues with attendance, as students avoided class or even school itself, which often led to a decrease in academic achievement for students who felt uncomfortable at their school. Relationships were often weaponized as girls used their influence with others to decide who should or should not be allowed into their social circles. Students felt rejected, which hurt their self-esteem, self-worth, and sense of belonging. One principal noted that students need to feel connected. Another principal noted that she had lost a promising student who felt overwhelmed by issues of relational aggression. When victims' esteem is impacted, they do not feel that their schools are emotionally safe.

Most of the administrators noted that they were not trained by the district to address incidents of relational aggression. However, most considered themselves to have been self-taught along the way. The one training that almost every administrator mentioned that had been

helpful, though not explicitly, has been restorative practices. It had not helped to minimize the number of incidents, but it had helped to get aggressors and victims to work through some of the issues.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of my study is to explore the lived experience of middle school administrators in addressing adolescent aggression. Relational aggression is a form of bullying prevalent among female adolescents. Middle school administrators must be able to respond to the academic and social impact of this issue. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the findings and a discussion of the implications with reference to the relevant literature and theories. There is a discussion of the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Finally, I conclude with the delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

### Summary of Findings

The first research question I asked in my study was, “How do middle school administrators define and describe relational aggression?” I found that the middle school administrators immediately discussed *skillsets* when asked to describe relational aggression. The concept of skillset surfaced both in the focus group and the semi-structured interview. Administrators found that students lacked the social skills to resolve conflict on their own. Students communicated through cyber-technology; minimizing the skill of traditional face-to-face contact. Administrators discussed that this lack of skill expanded their roles beyond instructional leadership, to include responding to students’ social and emotional needs. These administrators described relational aggression as “having a lack of basic relational skills.” Many of the participants noted that the two major characteristics of relational aggression were negative verbal and negative physical interactions among peers. Aggressive behavior was verbal, when aggressors name-called, spread rumors, and used derogatory language. Aggressive behavior was

physical when aggressors used physical intimidation and fighting. A key common characteristic of relational aggression was the utilization of technology. Aggressors often cyberbullied through social media applications, such as Facebook, Instagram, and SnapChat.

The second research question was: “How does relational aggression impact the academic and social development of students who are bullied?” These middle school administrators were responsible for the climate of their campus. They noted that relational aggression had an impact on campus climate: some victims started to fall behind in their academics, finding it tough to coexist in a classroom with their bully present. One principal noted that the aggressor’s presence caused intimidation, which had victims “staying for long periods of time in the restroom, going to the library instead of the cafeteria, and avoiding class or school altogether.” This led to decreased academic achievement for students who felt uncomfortable with their school’s climate. Female relationships revolved around relational social circles. Females were either granted or denied access to these circles. If a student was not in the good graces of the group, then these relationships were weaponized. Students were forbidden to associate with girls who were not in the social group. Those on the outside were often rejected, which impacted the self-esteem and a sense of belonging for some. When students were not emotionally and socially connected through a strong school climate, their esteem was impacted.

The third research question addressed was, “How does middle school administrators’ perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response?” The administrators’ perception was that they themselves were not trained adequately to address relational aggression. Most administrators seemed to be overwhelmed. As one principal said, “A lot of times, I just throw my hands up and say what the...” There were no pieces of training to address this issue within the district as the

administrators expressed that they were self-taught. However, there was one training called restorative practices that most administrators mentioned as helpful. It had not minimized incidents but had helped to resolve issues of relational conflicts that arose.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of my study was to examine the findings and the responses of the ten urban middle school administrators to the impact of relational aggression on their campuses. With the aim of providing support to current and future administrators' understanding of how this issue is being addressed. Current and future administrators may find insight from the experiences of these urban middle school administrators. My desire is that educational leaders might learn from these 10 leaders' experiences and apply their results to improve their own approach and practice.

### **Theoretical Findings**

Theoretically, my study solidifies the theoretical framework used in my study. My study was able to link Miller's Relational Cultural Theory with an understanding of Erikson's stage of development known as adolescence, as the lens to examine the middle school administrators' response. In my study I assumed that Middle School administrators struggled with understanding the role that *relationship* held for their female adolescent students. The question posed by my study was, do middle school administrators' perceptions of the impact of relational aggression influence their response? For most of the participants in my study, the answer to that question was in the affirmative. The participants shared experience that directly connects to elements of a surface understanding of Relational Cultural Theory. My study addresses a gap in the relational cultural literature because evidence exists from this study that aligns the middle school administrators' response to the social and academic implications, of Relational Cultural Theory.

In support of Relational Cultural Theory was the work of Erikson's (1993) eight stages of psychosocial development theory. The findings from the study confirmed Erikson's theory that suggested that adolescent girls found their identity in what their peers thought about them. Girls tended to struggle with their own identity and sense of worth, they often defined or redefined themselves from their peer interactions. From the study, it was clear that students valued peer opinion over parents', educators' and other adults in their lives.

In support of Miller's (1997) relational-cultural theory, the findings from the study suggested that adolescent females found their sense of connection and belonging in strong peer relationships. Daisy noted, "girls tend to school together like fish." She went on to explain with boys, the bonding centered around the activity itself, whereas with girls, the connection was based on the people involved. It was more important to say, "whom you did the activity with than the activity itself."

Also, from the research, it was clear that some girls went from social group to social group trying to find where they fit in, with some never truly being accepted. Aggressors held power here as they controlled the weaponization of relationships and could determine with a word who would be friends with whom.

### **Empirical Findings**

The findings from this study also appear to support the Rohrkemper and Brophy (1980) study, which found that most educators felt unprepared for dealing effectively with relational aggression. The participants in this study all shared the same sentiment. They felt the district had not adequately invested in the training for addressing these issues on their campuses. Many of them felt that they were left on their own to figure it out. From their study, Rohrkemper and Brophy also noted that some educators stated a desire for training but indicated that their job was

to teach and not to act as a therapist. This is where the participants in this study differed as they expressed the need to expand their role to address the social and emotional needs of their students, which would empower them to have a better relationship.

The findings from this study also appear to support what Lazarus and Pfohl (2010) said about students avoiding the academic setting due to incidents of bullying. This lowered student academic achievement as students avoided attending class or school altogether. According to Shindler and Jones (2011), it was the school administrator's role to maintain the social and academic climate. The academic climate was directly impacted by the social climate when students began to avoid school. One administrator noted that one of her promising students transferred to another school because of issues with relational aggression.

The findings from this study appear to contradict Brown (2003) and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) when they said adolescent females were more likely to be indirect in their aggression than males. Brown noted that boys found themselves in an administrator's office more often than girls for fighting, but the findings of this study showed that girls were also physically aggressive. One administrator noted that over time, her female students seemed to have become more aggressive physically. Most participants gave at least one example of the physical intimidation that aggressive females had inflicted on their peers.

### **Implications**

My study has broad implications for current and future administrators who are tasked with leading middle schools that must address the impact of relational aggression. Findings from my research have theoretical, empirical, and practical applications. In this section, I analyze how my research findings are applicable to these areas and suggest recommendations for the current and future Middle School administrator.

## Theoretical

My study solidifies the theoretical frameworks of both Erikson and Miller. The study links the experience of middle school administrators to the relational cultural experience of their female adolescent students. Relational Cultural Theory is a theory based on the significance of relationship to female development. Middle school administrators need to understand the inner workings of these dynamics as it relates to their students. Administrators also must understand the stage of development known as adolescence which consists of the struggle of identity and role confusion. This explains the influence that peers can have on one another at this age.

The implications of this study can provide practical understanding to current and future middle school administrators in dealing with issues of female relational aggression on their campuses. I would recommend district personnel who are hiring and recruiting new administrators to provide intensive training in Relational Cultural Theory and the stage of Adolescence. A solid understanding of these two theories will provide an understanding of what Wiseman (2002) calls “girl world.”

This study provides an important understanding of the difference between male and female adolescent conflict as females tend to weaponize their relationships. Wiseman (2002) said:

When individual females or a group of females weaponized their friendships that aggressive girls would forbid their peers from having social contact with certain girls.

Girls could only talk to peers if it were permitted by their immediate social circle.

Girls who are left out of the circle were more prone toward depression. Juvonen and Graham (2014), Hutzell and Payne (2012) and Olweus (1993) suggested that a bullied person tends to have lower self-esteem, lower self-confidence, and a higher level of depression when they are victims of relational aggression-based isolation. For adolescents in general, there is a need to

have a sense of identity (Erikson, 1993). For female students, identity is intimately connected with a sense of community and belonging (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Amundson (1991) and Miller (1997) said that apart of the female sense of self is found in being-in-relationship with others. Erikson (1993) said that adolescence can be a time of identity versus role confusion. The administrators in my study confirmed this. One example that stood out was given by Barbra. She said that she had straight girls experimenting with lesbianism to fit in and be accepted by peers. Barbra stated:

And some have, even in that group, in that little click. somehow even started experimenting with like, “Hey I think I like girls. So, I wanna be your girlfriend,” right? And so, then it went from “now we are besties to now we are girlfriends.” And a couple of them kind of clicked up. Now you got a group of seven, so somebody is gonna be left out. So, what we get? Now you got your seven. And then the Lone Ranger who isn't matched to someone is like, “well in order for me to be in this group I have to like girls.” And so, then she starts trying to figure out like, “Who can I like?”

Maguen and Armistead (2006), Miller (1997), and Amundson (1991) said that a girl's esteem is rooted in feeling a part of relationships; and maintain those relationships.

### **Empirical**

Empirically, my study has implications for current and future middle school leaders. There are two takeaways that I want to address in this section. First, the middle school movement was started to support the non-academic side of adolescence. It is imperative that administrators address the social emotional learning needs of their students. If they do not, they will continue to blame the home and society for a problem for which they are uniquely tasked to respond. Second, school leaders must gain the soft skills of effective communication and conflict

resolution and then teach their students how to navigate through the relational challenges common for students at this developmental age. District office personnel can make it apart of their in-service training, and if not leaders should be proactive as some in my study were to seek it out elsewhere when it is not taught by the district or the educational preparation program.

The literature shows that students have not always benefited from the academic and social aspects of the junior high environment. Maguen and Armistead (2006) described the failure to meet these social-emotional needs as what initially led to the national middle school movement. Current and future administrators must recognize the need to support their students in this area. One of the administrators in the study noted that “for many students, their grades tended to plateau at this age anyway.” Another administrator said, “There are social-emotional needs for students at this age that must be addressed to support academic and social development.”

### **Practical**

The implications of this study can assist administrators in proactively seeking out support for themselves, teachers, and students. One thing that constantly surfaced was the lack of skills that students had in relating to one another. Administrators could use their professional development time to bring in people who are skilled in the art of communication to teach the soft skills that many of the students are lacking. This training could begin with the teachers, who could then teach these skills to their students. It was clear that these skills were impacting the school climate, which directly impacts student achievement. Administrators’ lack of adequate response kept them in a place of frustration over what to do. The administrators noted that the problems of relational aggression were not going to simply go away, but it must be responded to

with proper training. I recommend current and future administrators are trained in some form of relational conflict-resolution strategy.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

School leadership is a vast topic of study, my study was confined to a population of ten middle school leaders. Therefore, the study did not include any results on the elementary or high school experiences as part of the data collection and analysis processes. Another delimitation of this research is the narrow inclusion criteria of the study participants being from one urban district during the time of the study.

This study examined how administrators responded to female students and therefore posed a delimitation through the exclusion of male students. Each gender had generally different experiences with bullying, and no mention was made in this study of students who identified as gender-neutral or non-conforming. It was decided to delimit the study by focusing on middle school administrators who had direct experience with aggressive relational behaviors. This study sought to interview ten Thorn Rose Middle School administrators who had experience with relational aggression with a minimum of five years in the profession.

The behavioral response of an individual administrator cannot represent a general analysis of all middle school administrators. The study accessed the contextual situation of ten participants during data analysis. It was limited to the middle school grades, thereby limiting the focus of the study to experience with this age group. The middle school level was selected due to its population of primarily early adolescent students. The demographic sample was limited due to the case study's design, as this was a collective case. A single case design would have provided more detail but could not be generalized beyond that case. The population of

administrator participants was determined based on the criterion of purposeful sampling, so other types of administrators or levels of experience could have been utilized as filters using a different sampling method and perhaps yielding alternative findings. Thus, the research took place in a single middle school district in northern Oklahoma, which presented a limitation in generalizing the results to other educational settings with differing demographics, though multiple campuses within the district were studied.

This study focused exclusively on negative female relationships; therefore, it presented the potential for gender bias in the participants. Another possible limitation was my own carryover of gender biases. The study only held a female focus and thus provided gender-specific information. The respondents provided information about bullying in the female experience. The gender difference and leadership styles of the participants also limited this study. According to Eagly and Johannesen (2001), though not absolute, men and women often had different leadership styles; women tended to be nurturing, empathetic and collaborative, while men tended to be more assertive, controlling and independent. Though there were exceptions to the preceding statement, gender biases may have interfered with the participants' answering of questions and making of inferences from the findings. Men and women have different assumptions and communicate differently, which had the potential to limit my ability as a researcher. However, every attempt was made to remove bias and to gather data objectively.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study indicated that relational aggression did affect middle school students, but the participants of this study were only middle school administrators in Thorn Rose Middle School, which was a part of a traditional urban public-school district in Northern Oklahoma. It is recommended that additional studies be conducted involving middle school

administrators of private schools or non-urban schools in other states. The demographics of these types of schools are usually less diverse culturally, ethnically and economically. It would be interesting to see if a similar conclusion or drawn with a less diverse student population.

Most of the participants believed that student skills were necessary to improve female interpersonal relationships. The participants were frustrated that students lacked the training at home and at school to resolve conflict and handle interactions non-aggressively. Further research in ways to educate parents, teachers, and students on effective communication skills would be extremely beneficial. Strengthening communication skills for all stakeholders would increase the likely hood of stronger relationships with all concerned.

Each of the participants felt unprepared to address this issue, but all noted that a great deal of the academic school time was utilized in its response. One principal said that he “spends up to two and one-half hours on average dealing with one incident of relational aggression” and another principal said it took her “an average of three hours of investigation into a single incident of relational aggression.” Yet another participant said that he “meets with the same group of girls weekly as new incidents continue to emerge. It is a non-stop!” It is recommended that district leadership examine the academic time off task that these incidents cause for administrators and develop a training program to help administrators to be more effective with their response.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, relational aggression is an issue that impacts the academic and social development of middle schoolers and it warrants further research. Continued research should explore the types of training that are needed for administrators to address these issues on their campuses to protect the schools’ climate. There should be an incorporation into the curriculum of

soft skills such as habits of communication, cordial discourse, and conflict resolution. The underlining theme that constantly resurfaced during this research was the lack of skills that students had in relating to one another.

Relational aggression is one type of bullying that is more common with females. Public service announcements and education are a need for parents, students, and the community on the definition of bullying and relational aggression as there are both legal and policy definitions for bullying. These administrators did the best they could with limited resources and training. Relational aggression affects all stakeholders in the middle school community, and it will take all stakeholders coming together for the appropriate response. This study showed that administrators have struggled with how to respond to relational aggression. With its often-covert nature, social media added a unique challenge to this issue. While administrators acknowledged that relational aggression was an issue to which they needed to respond, they could not offer solutions as to how to meet the challenge of responding to this behavior. Administrators who participated in the study shared their frustration at their inability to adequately respond.

These middle school administrators reported feeling hopeless; according to them, relational aggression is a problem that “isn’t going away.” The findings were consistent with the literature reviewed, such as the unique social dynamic of female relationships compared to males at this same age (Erikson, 1993; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Relational aggression is a form of social aggression. It causes harm that is not always visible like a bruise from a physical fight (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006).

There was one inconsistency from the literature, but this provides an area for potential future studies. The inconsistency in the literature was that the middle school movement existed to help students with their social adjustment. There was little evidence that middle school

administrators were especially equipped to handle the social-emotional needs of this age group or gender. The use of the Relational Cultural Theory was the ideal framework in which to examine relational aggression in the context of this study. As evidenced by the findings in this study that female relationships were indeed centered around their perception of how connected they felt with others.

Conducting interviews, observations, and a focus group provided evidence to me that relational aggression impacted female students academically, socially, and emotionally. While reflecting on the findings of the study, I was surprised to discover that administrators felt so ill-equipped to respond to this issue. These findings have left me wondering why school districts were not sending their administrators through specialized training on addressing relational issues and concerns, given that the administrators perceive themselves as unable to help students. It is my recommendation to school leadership to access any supports that are already in place, and for educational program and districts to prepare current and future administrators with the tools to respond to relational aggression at the middle school level.

## REFERENCES

- Amundson, K. J. (1991). *Building self-esteem: A guide for parents, schools, and communities*. Arlington, VA: *American Association of School Administrators*.
- Arora, C. M. J. (1996). Defining bullying toward a clearer understanding and more effective intervention strategies. *School Psychology International*, *17*, 317–329.
- Asher, S. R. (Ed.). (1990). *Peer rejection in childhood*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted from *Cambridge*).
- Ashford, J. B., LeCroy, C. W., & Williams, L. R. (2018). *Human behavior in the social environment: A multidimensional perspective: Empowerment series* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Ayres, L., Kavanaugh, K., & Knafl, K. (2003). Within-Case and across-case approaches to qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, *13*, 871–883.
- Bahsin, M. P. (1987). The dynamics of teacher-pupil perception. *Indian Psychological Review*, *32*(2), 30-34.
- Balter, L., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Child psychology: A handbook of contemporary issues* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Banks, R. (1997). *Bullying in schools*. ERIC Digest; ERIC Clearing House on Elementary and Early Education, Champaign, IL; University of Illinois.
- Batsche, G. M., & Knoff, H. M. (1994). Bullies and their victims: Understanding a pervasive problem in the schools. *School Psychology Review*, *23*, 165–175.
- Beale, A. V., & Hall, K. R. (2007). Cyberbullying: What school administrators (*and parents*) can do. *The Clearing House*, *81*(1), 8–12.

- Berger, K. S. (2007). Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten? *Developmental Review*, 27, 90–126.
- Berndt, T. J., & Keefe, K. (1995). Friend's influence on adolescents' adjustment to school. *Child Development*, 66(5), 1312–1329.
- Bey, T. M., & Turner, G. Y. (1996). *Making school a place of peace*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press.
- Bingham, M., & Stryker, S. (1995). *Things will be different for my daughter: A practical guide to building her self-esteem and self-reliance*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books.
- Birkinshaw, S., & Eslea, M. (1998). Teachers' attitudes and actions toward boy v girl and girl v boy bullying. In *annual conference of the Developmental Section of the British Psychological Society, Lancaster University, Lancaster, England*. Retrieved from <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psychol/bully/files/birkin.htm>.
- Bjorkvist, K., Lagerspetz, K. M. J., & Kaukianinen, A. (1992). Do girls manipulate and boys fight? Development trends in regard to direct and indirect aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 18, 117–127.
- Blakely-McClure, S. J., & Ostrov, J. M. (2016). Relational aggression, victimization, and self-concept: Testing pathways from middle childhood to adolescence. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 45(2), 376–390.
- Bloom, A. (2009). Girl's suffer lion's share of bullying. *Times Educational Supplement*.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.

- Borg, M., & Falzon, J. (1990). Teacher's perceptions of primary school children's undesirable behaviors: The effects of teaching experience, pupil's age, sex and ability stream. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *60*, 220–226.
- Boschert, S. (2008). Surveys of Teens Provide Details, Ideas to Counter Bullying. *Internal Medicine News*, *41*(6), 30.
- Bosworth, K., Ford, L., & Hernandez, D. (2011). School climate factors contributing to student and faculty perceptions of safety in select Arizona schools. *Journal of School Health*, *8*(4), 194–201.
- Boulton, M. (1997). Teacher's views on bullying: Definitions, attitudes and ability to cope. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *67*, 223–233.
- Boyer, W. (2010). Preadolescent violence among girls. *Youth Society*, *42*(1), 33–58.
- Bradley, A. M., & Harrell, M. C. (2009). Data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. *RAND National Defense Research Institute*.
- Brady, K. B., & Conn, K. (2006). Bullying without borders: The rise of cyberbullying in America's schools. *School Business*, *72*(8), 8–10.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brown, L. M. (2003). *Girl fighting: Betrayal and rejection among girls*. New York, NY, US: New York University Press.
- Campbell, M. (2008). Cyberbullying: An old problem in a new guise? *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, *15*, 68–76.
- Cappella, E., & Weinstein, R. (2008). The Prevention of Social Aggression Among Girls. *Social Development*, *15*(3), 434–462.

- Charach, A., Pepler, D., & Ziegler, S. (1995). 'Bullying at School: A Canadian Perspective.' *Education Canada*, 35:12-18.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Covington, M. (1984). The self-worth theory of achievement motivation: Findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 85(1).
- Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). "We're Not Friends Anymore! Unless...": The Frequency and Harmfulness of Indirect, Relational, and Social Aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32(4), 294-307.
- Craig, W., Pepler, D., & Atlas, R. (2000). Observations of bullying in the playground and in the classroom. *School Psychology International*, 21(1), 22–36.
- Craig, W., & Harel, Y. (2004). Bullying, physical fighting, and victimization. In C. Currie (Ed.),
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*.
- Crick, N. R., Casas, J. F., & Ku, H. (1999). Relational and Physical Forms of Peer Victimization in Preschool. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 376–385.
- crisis: A mixed-methods design exploring the relationship between ethnic identity development status and student achievement* (Doctoral Dissertation). Regent University. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

- Davis, J. M., Harris, C. E., & Berry, E. J. (2016). Relational Cultural Theory: A Perspective for Adolescent Development. *National Youth-At-Risk Conference Savannah*, 88.
- Dean, M. (2012). The Story of Amanda Todd. *The New Yorker*.
- Denzin, N. K. (Ed.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Deshefy-Longhi, T., Sullivan-Bolyai, S., & Dixon, J. K. (2009). Data Collection Order: A Primer. *Southern online journal of nursing research*, 9(3), 6. Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20(3):295-315.
- Duke, L. D. (1978). The etiology of student misbehavior and the depersonalization of blame. *Review of Educational Research*, 48, 415–437.
- Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., Iver, M. D., & Feldlaufer, J. (1993). Negative effects of traditional middle schools on students' motivation. *The Elementary School Journal*, 553–574.
- Elias, M., & Zinsd, J. (2003). Bullying, Other Forms of Peer Harassment, and Victimization in the Schools. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 19, 1–5.
- Elliott, D. S., & Voss, H. L. (1974). *Delinquency and dropout*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes: Chicago guides to writing, editing, and publishing* (2nd ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1993). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Ferkany, M. (2008). The educational importance of self-esteem. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42, 119–132.

- Frankenberg, R. (1980). Participant observers. In *Field Research: a Sourcebook and Field Manual* (Burgess. ed.), Allen & Unwin, London, pp. 50-52.
- Fonzi, A. (1997). *Bullying in Italy: The phenomenon of bullying at school from Piedmont to Sicily: Research and perspectives for intervention*. Firenze: Giunti.
- Fowler, F. (1995). *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Fredricks, J., McColskey, W., Meli, J., Mordica, J., Montrosse, B., & Mooney, K. (2011). *Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: A description of 21 instruments* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2011–No. 098). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast.
- Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication: Qualitative studies in psychology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gardenhire, R. (2013). Drillers Announce Anti-Bullying Program with TPS. *MiLB Article*.
- Gibbs, A. (1997) 'Focus Groups', *Social Research Update*, 19, Winter, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.
- Gibson, W. A. (2003). Elementary and middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University 2003, ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 64/10, 3550).
- Gilligan, C. (2003). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

- Giorgi, A. (1994). A phenomenological perspective on certain qualitative research methods. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 25*, 190–220.
- Gold, M. (1978). Scholastic Experiences, Self-Esteem, and Delinquent behavior: A theory for alternative schools. *Crime and Delinquency, 24*(3), 290–308.
- Gomes, M. M. (2007). A concept analysis of relational aggression. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, 14*, 510–515.
- Gordon R.L. (1975). *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics*. Dorsey Press, Illinois.
- Green, J., Camilli, G., & Elmore, P. (2006). *Handbook of complementary methods in education research*. Washington, D.C: Published for the American Educational Research Association.
- Gruber, J., & Fineran, S. (2016). Sexual Harassment, Bullying, and School Outcomes for High School Girls and Boys. *Violence Against Women, 22*(1), 112–133.
- Hanish, L. D., & Guerra, N. (2004). Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies: Developmental Continuity or Developmental Change? *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 50*(1), 17–38.
- Hatcher, J. W. (2011). *The African-American adolescent male identity development*
- Heinemann, P. P. (1972). *Bullying: Group violence among children and adults*. Stockholm: Nature and culture.
- Henkin, R. (2012). *Confronting bullying: Literacy as a tool for character education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Henry, D., Guerra, N., Huesmann, R., Tolan, P., VanAcker, R., & Eron, L. (2000). Normative Influence on Aggression in Urban Elementary School Classrooms. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(1), 59–81.

- Hinduja, S. (2012). *School climate 2.0: Preventing cyberbullying and sexting one classroom at a time*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Hodges, E. V. E., & Perry, D. G. (1999). Personal and interpersonal antecedents and consequences of victimization by peers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*, 677–685.
- Holfeld, B., & Grabe, M. (2012). Middle school students' perceptions of and responses to cyberbullying. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, *46*(4), 395–413.
- Hoover, J. H. (1996). *The bullying prevention handbook: A guide for principals, teachers, and counselors*. Bloomington, Ind: National Education Service.
- Hutzell, K. L., & Payne, A. A. (2012). The Impact of bullying victimization on school avoidance. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *10*, 370–385.
- Isakson, K., & Jarvis, P. (1999). The adjustment of adolescents during the transition into high school: A short-term longitude study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *28*(1), 1–26.
- James, V. H., & Owens, L. D. (2004). Peer victimization and conflict resolution among adolescent girls in a single-sex South Australian school. *International Education Journal*, *5*(1), 37–49.
- Johnstone, K. (1992). *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (pp. 33–74). New York: Routledge.
- Jones, J., & Augustine, S. M. (2015). Creating an anti-bullying culture in secondary schools: Characteristics to consider when constructing appropriate anti-bullying programs. *American Secondary Education*, *43*(3), 73–84.

- Juvonen, J., & Graham, S. (2014). Bullying in schools: The power of bullies and the plight of victims. *Annual review of psychology*, *65*, 159–185.
- Kaltiala-Heino, R., Rimplela, M., Rantanen, P., & Rimpela, A. (2000). Bullying at school-an indicator of adolescents at risk for mental disorders. *Journal of Adolescence*, *23*(6), 661–674.
- Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996). Peer victimization: Cause or consequence of school maladjustment? *Child Development*.
- Kowalski, R., & Limber, S. (2007). Electronic bullying among middle school students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *41*, 22–30.
- Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, R. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ladd, G. W., Kochenderfer, B. J., & Coleman, C. C. (1997). Classroom peer acceptance, friendship, and victimization: Distinct relation systems that contribute uniquely to children's school adjustments? *Child Development*, *68*, 1181–1197.
- Lawson, B. (1991). *Pupil discipline and exclusion in schools*. London: Longman.
- Lazarus, P. J., & Pfohl, W. (2010). Bullying prevention and intervention: Information for educators. *National Association of School Psychologist* (Vol. III).
- Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2003). What do we already know about successful school leadership? *American Educational Research Association*.

- Li, Q. (2006). Cyberbullying in Schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International*, 27(2), 157–170.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents-Investigating-the-Links-to-improved-student-learning.pdf>.
- Lumsden, L. (2002). *Preventing bullying. ERIC Digest*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED463563)
- Maguen, S., & Armistead, L. (2006). Abstinence Among Female Adolescents: Do Parents Matter Above and Beyond the Influence of Peers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(2), 260–264.
- Mason, K. (2008). Cyberbullying: A preliminary assessment for school personnel. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(4), 323-347.
- Mays, K.A. (1989) Interview techniques in qualitative research: concerns and challenges. In *Qualitative Nursing Research: A Contemporary Dialogue* (Morse J.M. ed.), Aspen, Rockville, Maryland.
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Brashears, M. E. (2006). Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. *American Sociological Review*, 71(3), 353-375.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. P. (1997). *The healing connection*. Boston: Beacon Press Books.
- Mishna, F. (2004). A qualitative study of bullying from multiple perspectives. *Children & Schools, 26*(4), 234-247.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Mulhall, A. (2003). In the field: notes on observation in qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 41*(3), 306-313.
- Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying Behaviors Among US Youth Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment. *American Medical Associations, 285*(16), 2094–2100.
- Nelson, G. (1984). The relationship between dimensions of classroom and family environments and the self-concept, satisfaction and achievement of Grade 7 and 8 students. *Journal of Community Psychology, 12*, 276–287.
- Newman, B. M., & Newman, P. R. (2012). *Development through life: A psychosocial approach*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Newman-Carlson, D., & Horne, A. M. (2004). Bully Busters: A Psycho-education Intervention for reducing bullying behavior in middle school students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 82*(3), 259-269.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Odgers, C. L., & Moretti, M. M. (2002). Aggressive and antisocial girls: Research update and challenges. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health, 1*(2), 103-119.

- Olweus, D. (1978). *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys: The Series in clinical and community psychology*. New York: Halsted Press.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Cambridge, USA: Blackwell. (Reprinted from *Oxford, UK*).
- Osterman, K. (1999). Development Trends and Sex Differences in Conflict Behavior. (Doctoral dissertation), Abo Akedemi University, Vassa, Finland.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Pedersen, S., & Seidman, E. (2004). Team Sports Achievement and Self-Esteem Development Among Urban Adolescent Girls. *Psychology of Women, 28*, 412–422.
- Pellegrini, A. D., & Bartini, M. (2001). Dominance in Early Adolescent Boys: Affiliative and Aggressive Dimensions and Possible Functions. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly 47*(1), 142-163.
- Pervin, K., & Turner, A. (1994) An Investigation into Staff and Pupil's Knowledge, Attitudes and Beliefs about Bullying in an Inner-City School. *Pastoral Care in Education, 12* (3), pp. 4-10.
- Polk, K. (1975). School and the Delinquency Experience. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 2*(4), 315–338.
- Portin, B., Alejano, C., Knapp, M., & Marzolf, E. (2006). Redefining Roles, Responsibilities, and Authority of School Leaders. *Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy*, 1–41.
- Presser, S. (2004). *Methods for testing and evaluating survey questionnaires*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- Price-Mitchell, M. (2010). *Civic learning at the edge: Transformative stories of highly engaged youth*. Doctoral dissertation. Fielding Graduate University, Santa, Barbara, CA.
- psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66, 710-722.
- Rice, J. K. (2010). Principal Effectiveness and Leadership in an Era of Accountability: What Research Says. *National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research*, 8.
- Rivera-Maestre, R. (2010) *Narratives of relational aggression and violence among urban adolescent girls*. (Doctoral dissertation).
- Rodkin, P. C., Espelage, D. L., & Hanish, L. D. (2015). A Relational Framework for Understanding Bullying: Developmental Antecedents and Outcomes. *American Psychologist*, 70(4), 311–321.
- Roe, K., & Gunilla, J. (1998). Delinquent boys and precocious girls. Gender, school, and problem behaviors in early adolescents. *Young*, 6, 22-38.
- Rohrkemper, M. M., & Brophy, J. E. (1980). Teachers' Specific Strategies for Dealing with Hostile Aggressive Students. *The Institute for Research on Teaching*, 86, 1–41.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: SAGE.
- Sarason, S. B. (1996). *Revisiting "The culture of the school and the problem of change."* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sawyer, J., Mishna, F., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2011). The missing voice: Parents' perspectives of bullying. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1795–1803.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, Calif: Sage Publications.

- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shindler, J., & Jones, A. (2011). Exploring the school climate—student achievement connection: And making sense of why the first precedes the second. *Alliance for the Study of School Climate*.
- Simmons, R. (2011). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Simmons, R. G. (2009). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and school context*. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers.
- Skiba, R. J., Peterson, R. L., & Williams, T. (1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20(3): 295-315.
- Smith H.W. (1975). *Strategies of Social Research: methodological imagination*. Prentice Hall International, London
- Smith, P. K., Morita, Y., Junger, J., Olweus, D., Catalano, R., & Slee, P. (1999). *The nature of school bullying: A cross-national perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Snyder, T. D., DeBrey, C., & Dillow, S. A. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics 2015* (NCES 2016-014). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Stipek, D. J., & MacIver, D. (1989). Developmental change in children's assessment of intellectual competence. *Child Development*, 60, 521-538.

- Stotzer, R. L. (2015). Youth involvement in anti-gay and anti-lesbian bias crimes. *Violence and Victims*, 30(2), 308.
- Stuart-Cassel, V., Bell, A., & Springer, F. (2011). *Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies*. Washington, DC:US Dept of Education.
- Taylor, L., & Adelman, H. S. (2000). Connecting Schools, Families, and Communities. *Professional School Counseling*, 3(5), 298.
- Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. (2016). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (4th ed.). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Treece E.W. & Treece J.W. (1986). *Elements of Research in Nursing* 4th edn. C.V. Mosby, St Louis.
- Trochim, W. (2000). *The Research Methods Knowledge Base*, 2nd Edition. Atomic Dog Publishing, Cincinnati, OH.
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in Qualitative. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80–96.
- Turner, D. W., III (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report*. 15(3), 754-760.
- Twemlow, S. W., & Sacco, F. C. (2013). Bullying is everywhere: Ten universal truths about bullying as a social process in schools and communities. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 33(2), 73 – 8.
- U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS]. stopbullying.gov. Washington, DC: Author; (n.d.a) Retrieved from <http://www.stopbullying.gov>

- Weiss, C. C., & Kipnes, L. (2006). Reexamining middle school effects: A comparison of middle grades students in middle schools and K-8 schools. *American Journal of Education*, 239-272.
- Wenk, E. A. (1975). Juvenile justice and the public schools: Mutual benefit through educational reform. *Juvenile Justice*, 26, 7-14.
- White, B. A., & Turner, K. A. (2014). Anger rumination and effortful control: Mediation effects on reactive but not proactive aggression. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 56-186-189.
- Willard, N. (2006). Flame retardant. *School Library Journal*, 54-56.
- Williams, A., & Katz, L. (2001). The use of focus group methodology in education: some theoretical and practical considerations. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, University of Calgary, Canada.
- Wilson, J. R., & Corlett, E. N. (Eds.). (1995). *Evaluation of human work: A practical ergonomics methodology* (2nd ed.). Bristol, Pa: Taylor & Francis.
- Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen bees & wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and other realities of adolescence*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Wynne, E. A. (1980). *Looking at schools: Good, bad, and indifferent*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Young people's health in context (pp. 133–144). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- Zarzour, K. (2000). *Facing the schoolyard bully*. New York: Firefly Books.

## Appendix A: Consent for Research

### CONSENT FORM

An Urban District's Middle School Response to the Impact of Relational Aggression:

A Case Study

Billy Thompson

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of middle school administrators' response to relational aggression. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a middle school principal in this district with a minimum of five years of experience. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Billy Thompson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

1. How do middle school administrators define and describe relational aggression?
2. How does relational aggression impact the academics and social development of students who are bullied?
3. How does a middle school administrators' perception of the impact of relational aggression on the academic and social development of female students influence their response?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Give me up to an hour of your time for a confidential, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview protocol.
2. Allow me to conduct a follow-up (member checking) meeting to verify if my research journal is accurate. All interviews will be transcribed afterward and may need to be verified.

3. Allow a campus observation lasting a minimum of one hour. Observations will be done at each site after a semi-structured interview has been completed.
4. Participate in a 90-minute, video recorded focus group with other middle school administrators in this district. Allow member checking as the focus group will be transcribed afterward and may need to be verified.
5. Participate in email, phone, and personal correspondence for communication and clarification of data collection.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. I will only report information if, in the course of this study, I become privy to information that triggers the [mandatory reporting](#) requirements for child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study. However, the potential benefit to society of this study is that it may lead the educational practitioner to increased management of the adolescent aggression phenomenon.

**Compensation:** You will not receive any payment/reimbursement/incentives for taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study are kept private. The data collected is confidential. I will know what data belongs to whom, but I will not disclose identities. Pseudonyms will be used in reporting. In any sort of report, I might publish; I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Each participant and the school district will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password protected laptop. Even the transcriptions will be kept electronically. I will keep this data for three years, and then all copies will be deleted. Lessons learned from this study may be shared in a future presentation before school leaders in another setting, but no names will be revealed.
- All interviews and the focus group will be recorded with an audio or video device, typed, and stored on a password-protected laptop computer. Once this information has been analyzed, coded, and the results determined, it will be kept for three years as per federal requirement. All recordings will then be erased, and all documents shredded after five years.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Billy Thompson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [bthompson12@liberty.edu](mailto:bthompson12@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Jose Puga, at [japuga@liberty.edu](mailto:japuga@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio/video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B: Field Observation Notes**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Administrator: \_\_\_\_\_

Campus: \_\_\_\_\_

Physical setting: visual layout
---------------------------------

<b>Participants:</b>  <b>Activities:</b>  <b>Interactions:</b>  <b>Participants quotes:</b>	<b>Comments:</b> questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, interpretations
---	---

**Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe the word aggression? What types of behaviors come to mind in your experience?
2. What are some of the most common forms of relational aggression on your campus?
3. What are some of the characteristics of relational aggression that you have observed?
4. In your opinion, what is the motivation behind relational aggressive behavior?
5. Give some examples of adolescent aggressive behavior that you have witnessed on your campus this year.
6. What influence do you see relational aggression having on academic progress?
7. What impact do you see relational aggression having on-campus social development in peer relationships?
8. What impact does relational aggression have on self-esteem?
9. How are incidents of relational aggression usually reported to you? Who does the reporting?
10. In what ways have anti-bullying programs been effective in dealing with this issue on your campus?
11. Describe the types of professional developments that you have attended to enable you to address the impact of incidents of relational aggression on your campus.
12. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about female bullying?

## **Appendix D: Focus Group Discussion**

### **Project Title: Administrator response to the impact of relational aggression: A Case Study**

Thank you for taking part in this focus group. We are here to discuss the topic of relational aggression. We are discussing this because I am interested in learning more about this issue as part of a research study through Liberty University. This focus group will run for approximately 90 minutes. I will go over what was discussed with you to make sure we understand. You may choose not to answer certain questions and can stop your participation in this group at any time. I will begin by asking some general questions and will ask some follow up and clarifying questions based on your responses. I may also ask specific questions if there is further information needed. In the end, after summarizing what was discussed, an opportunity will be given to make any additional comments and clarifications. Are there any questions?

### **Focus Group Questions:**

1. What experience do you have addressing incidents of relational aggression?
2. What supports have you been given to better address relational aggressive activity on your campuses?
3. What types of changes in social behavior do you notice from students who are victims of relational aggression?
4. What types of changes in academic behavior do you notice from students who are victims of relational aggression?
5. What has been your response to these academic and social behavioral changes?
6. What advice can you give to a first-year middle school administrator about dealing with the phenomenon on their campus for the upcoming school year?
7. Follow up questions will be asked based on the participants' responses.

## **Appendix E: Recruitment Email**

### **RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Subject Line: Participants being sought for a doctoral Administrator Perception research study

My name is Billy Thompson, a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University. I am looking for participants for a doctoral research study. You are receiving this email because you are a Middle School Administrator in Tulsa Public Schools. Your email address was obtained from the district website. This study is about middle school administrator response to the impact of female bullying (adolescent aggression).

To be able to take part in this study, individuals must have been in education a minimum of five years. If you take part in this study, you would participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview, a 90-minute focus group with other participants in the district and allow a one-hour campus observation. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

For your convenience, I have attached a Consent to Participate form to this email, which contains additional information about my research. To participate, please read, sign, scan, and return the signed consent form to this email, and I will contact you to schedule the interview. If you have any questions about the study, please email me at [bthomopson12@liberty.edu](mailto:bthomopson12@liberty.edu) or call (214) 395-7980.

Thank you,

Billy Thompson

## Appendix F: Telephone Script

### TELEPHONE FOR EMAIL FOLLOW-UP

Hello, my name is Billy Thompson. I am a former employee of the district, and currently, I am a student at Liberty University conducting research entitled AN URBAN DISTRICT'S MIDDLE SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE IMPACT OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A CASE STUDY. I am calling to ask you if you received an email from me requesting your participation.

*If they didn't receive the email:* May I send it to you now that I have you on the line? I can follow up in a few days if you have any questions.

*If they did receive this email:* Thank you. I wanted to follow up to see if you had any questions about the study that I can answer at this time. I would love to have you as a participant; if you are interested I would need the consent form that I emailed to be signed and returned; though, I can pick it up in person if you prefer.

As a reminder: This study is about middle school administrator response to the impact of female bullying (adolescent aggression). If you take part in this study, you would participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview, a 90-minute focus group with other participants in the district and allow a one-hour campus observation. To be able to take part in this study, individuals must have been in education a minimum of five years.

Participation is completely voluntary. This means that you do not have to participate in this study unless you want to.

Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your relationship with Tulsa Public Schools.

I appreciate your time.

Do you have any questions at this time?

*If 'no,' thank them for their time and end the call.*

*If 'yes,' answer any questions or concerns.*

If you have any questions about the study, please email me at [bthomopson12@liberty.edu](mailto:bthomopson12@liberty.edu) or call (214) 395-7980.

Thank you.

**Appendix G: IRB Approval Letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 6, 2019

Billy Thompson

IRB Approval 3687.030619: An Urban District's Middle School Response to the Impact of Relational Aggression: A Case Study

Dear Billy Thompson,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project. Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## Appendix H: Code Matrix

Skillset	Characteristics	Climate	Esteem	Education	Solutions
Hard time communicating	Repeated behaviors	Don't want to be in class with others	Bullying exalted temporarily	Personal Experience	Social Check-ins
Not able to have conversation/mediation	Misused and misunderstood terminology	Drama erupts upon re-entry	Some come with low esteem	Bullying Forums	Speaking positively to students
Don't know how to hear "no."	Cold and dismissive	Instruction is hindered	Bully and victim have low esteem	Social-Emotional Learning	Modeling good behavior
Not knowing how to downshift	Not an isolated incident	Responsible for other's baggage	Lacking in confidence to be one's self	Team Building	Skill building
Don't understand others or self or one's strength/value	Social media enabled	Students living in fear	Not good enough for groups	Behavior Policy	Mental Health evals
Not knowing how to socialize	Back and forth	Social standing	Taken out of character	Online bullying video	Mediations
Not willing to co-exist	Non-stop	Fakeness of friendships	Make self important	Restorative Practice	District Trainings
Don't know how to interact without being a bully	Passive-aggressive	Climate must be guarded	Victims hurting	Self-Taught	Conflict Resolution Training
Lack social skills	Violent		Unworthiness	No support	Parent Training
Talk freely by keyboard but not in person	Verbal and non-verbal		Need to feel accepted	Reading Book	SEL Training
No self-control, just reaction			Desire to be included	Don't have any	

**Appendix I: Participants**

<b>Administrator</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Year Experience</b>
Alan	40s	Caucasian	16 years
Barbra	40s	African American	20 years
Grace	60s	Caucasian	40 years
Debra	40s	African American	22 years
Harold	30s	African American	10 years
Vanessa	60s	Caucasian	26 years
Zachary	40s	African American	23 years
Elaine	60s	Caucasian	39 years
Velma	50s	Caucasian	29 years
Daisy	40s	Caucasian	20 years