Relational Aggression Among Middle School Girls: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

A thesis presented

by

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Abstract
Bullying behavior among youths has been a long-standing problem that parents and educators spend a great deal of time trying to combat. In particular, relational aggression, due to its covert nature and the difficulty in identifying the behavior, presents a greater challenge to youths, parents and educators and warranted further investigation. This covert behavior appears to peak in middle school and is employed at a higher rate by girls. Thus, a qualitative approach was used to examine the experiences and perceptions of relational aggression of middle school girls, their parents and middle school educators. Three separate focus groups were conducted with girls, parents and educators and data was analyzed through a social ecological lens. This study also aimed to examine the responses of the participants and the perception girls hold regarding how their parents and teachers respond to reports of relational aggression. Results indicate that boys are engaging in this behavior more than previously observed and youths are exhibiting aggressive behaviors towards their peers via technological devices and social networking sites more so than in person. Additionally, results indicated that training for both parents and educators on how to identify these behaviors, as well as how to respond to them, is needed. Further, results indicated a disconnect in the communication among girls, parents and educators which the participants report exacerbates the problem of relational aggression in schools.

Key words: relational aggression, bullying, middle school, social-ecological theory, cyberbullying, peer aggression
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

On January 14, 2010, Phoebe Prince, a 15 year-old girl from South Hadley, Massachusetts, hanged herself after being continuously harassed and taunted by her classmates (Norman & Connolly, 2011). This aggression was perpetrated by a group of girls who were angry about Phoebe having a relationship with a popular boy in school. The group of girls taunted, teased, and physically bullied Phoebe for three months before she went home from school one day and took her own life (Hargrove, 2010). While this case of bullying may be extreme, indeed one out of every four schoolchildren is bullied mentally, physically, and verbally (Bullying Statistics, 2010). These findings, which are the result of a national survey conducted on this topic by the American Justice Department (an organization devoted to educating the public about bullying issues), are the best and most recent available data. Other findings from this study, presented in no particular order, demonstrate that (1) ninety percent of fourth through eighth graders are victims of some type of bullying; (2) on any given day, 15% of students who are absent from school report that it is because they fear being bullied; and (3) teenagers, 12-17 years old, perceive that school violence has increased (Bullying Statistics, 2010). Taken together, the findings above, especially when considered in light of Phoebe Prince’s suicide and other similar stories highlighted by the media more recently in order to raise awareness about this pervasive issue, suggest a cause for concern.

As suggested by the above paragraph, the number of bullying incidence being reported nation wide is growing and the consequences associated with bullying are becoming more visible. Indeed, being victimized by peers can cause emotional distress in the form of depression and anxiety (Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004; Davidson & Demaray, 2007) which can then lead
to other problems. Nishina, Juvonen, and Witkow, (2005) found that students who suffered from emotional distress as a consequence of being bullied developed academic issues such as poor attitudes towards school and even school phobia, which, in turn, negatively affected their grades. Additionally, the authors report that students who were victimized, in addition to suffering from both emotional programs such as depression, social anxiety, and suicide risk also suffer physically with headaches and stomachaches (Nishina et al., 2005) These consequences alone provide a strong rationale for the issue of bullying to be examined more closely.

The state of Massachusetts began examining the issue of bullying more closely following the tragedy in South Hadley. It was discovered, upon an official investigation into Phoebe Prince’s suicide that despite knowing she was being harassed, the school district had neither responded to her victimization nor had they protected her from her abusers (Hargrove, 2010). In response to this incident, a directive from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was issued; all Massachusetts schools were charged with developing anti-bullying policies to address the problem of bullying in schools. These policies, which would address intervention and prevention programs, were to be written and implemented by December 2010. The policies, signed into law by the Governor, address five areas: a prevention and intervention plan, Internet safety, bullying prevention instruction, professional development and requirements for students with disabilities (DESE, 2010).

While the policies put into place in Massachusetts schools are a positive step, there is still a concern in that some bullying behaviors can be easily seen while others cannot. For example, when a student claims to be bullied, the overt types of bullying are often what first come to people’s minds (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). However, there is a more covert type of bullying identified by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) to which girls in particular were ostensibly prone. This
covert bullying, dissimilarly referred to by various authors as bullying, covert bullying, peer aggression, female aggression and relational aggression is comprised of behaviors such as social exclusion, rumor spreading, and manipulating relationships, among others, has been reported as being more common among females than in males (Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Pereira, 2011). Of concern is that these types of behaviors may be difficult to observe for people outside of the peer group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In other words, parents and teachers, because they are not part of the peer group, may not be able to recognize and identify these behaviors. As a result, girls who are victimized may be dealing with their victimization alone, without support.

Accordingly, the covert bullying behaviors described by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) give reason to believe that bullying among girls should also be of concern. Odgers and Moretti (2002) reported that there is a growing acknowledgement among researchers that girls are increasingly engaging in aggressive behavior. It is unclear whether girls are actually becoming increasingly aggressive or awareness of the existence of girls’ aggression is simply increasing as suggested by Odgers and Moretti, or even that girls are being increasingly policed, as suggested by Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008). Regardless, increased press has led to a push by policy makers to develop programs and guidelines to address aggressive behavior in girls within the current mandates. In spite of this push, there have been delays in program development due to need for additional research on aggressive behavior in girls. In fact, Murray-Close et al. (2014) reported that studies examining youth aggression tend to fail to fully evaluate aggression in girls. This is cause for concern when trying to combat relational aggression.

Because of the need to understand this phenomenon more extensively, there has been an increasing amount of interest in the behavior of aggressive girls in recent years (Ringose, 2006).
Research has shown that girls are just as likely as boys to be aggressive (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert 2005), though as was pointed out almost twenty years ago, they are likely to be involved in aggressive behaviors that are covert (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), such as those described above, which include gossiping, dirty looks, rumors and social exclusion. One of the phrases pointed out in an earlier paragraph to describe this phenomenon is known as *relational aggression* and was coined in response to the disparity between the physical dominance aggressive boys may be seeking over their peers, while girls tend to focus on relational issues. In other words, girls’ aggressive behaviors seek to damage another girl’s friendship or inclusion in certain groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It is this term, which will take precedence over the others in the remainder of this document.

Besides the covert behavior demonstrative of relational aggression, cyberbullying has recently become a concern. In truth, cyberbullying is simply a variant of relational aggression, though it is conducted through online and electronic means such as social networking sites and text messaging. Indeed, Norman and Connolly (2011) found that the occurrence of cyberbullying has grown rapidly due to the technology boom and influx of social media into students’ lives. Additionally, the cyberspace world provides a medium by which anyone can be aggressive towards their peers at any time of day, which means that youths can be victimized in the confines of their own homes. Moreover, youths who engage in cyberbullying behaviors do not have to be strong enough to physically dominate their peers, as they can remain anonymous in cyberspace, which provides them with a safety net (Norman & Connolly, 2011). The ability to be aggressive against a peer at anytime of the day, coupled with the anonymity cyberbullying provides, presents a unique challenge for teachers who are charged with implementing anti-
bullying policies in their classrooms, as these behaviors, like covert forms of relational aggression described above, are difficult to see.

Consequently, the recent push to create anti-bullying policies is helping to raise awareness of bullying which includes relational aggression. Like the South Hadley incident involving Phoebe Prince, there have been other recent cases to which national attention has been paid regarding several incidents of suicide (Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Indeed, a quick Internet search provides many faces of girls who were victims of relational aggression. Dawn-Marie Wesley, for example, was just 14 years old when she hanged herself in November of 2000 (Ringrose, 2006; Grindlay, 2002). Her suicide note stated that after being threatened and taunted, she felt death was her only escape (Grindlay, 2002). More recently, Amanda Todd, 15 years old, killed herself after being cyberbullied by her classmates (Mungin, 2012). Amanda’s case made national headlines because of her YouTube video posted just days before her death in which she recounts the torment she faced on a daily basis. She had made two previous suicide attempts before finally succeeding on October 10, 2012. Unfortunately the sort of relationally aggressive behaviors these adolescents endured including taunting, teasing and cyberbullying, can be difficult for teachers to observe and in turn, to respond (Mishna, 2004). It appears, after an examination of the literature that even in the event that teachers become aware of these behaviors, they may be ill equipped to respond to these behaviors. It is unclear if districts provide enough training for teachers to be able to identify relationally aggressive behaviors. Because of incidents such as these, and the difficulty facing teachers, school districts have subsequently been forced to look at how they handle aggression in their schools and create policies accordingly (DESE, 2010).
It seems clear from the above, that to the extent that relationally aggressive behaviors are difficult to observe and teachers are ill-equipped to handle them if even they do become aware, the consequences can be devastating. While the above cases of suicide may be rare, certainly they provide evidence that children may be suffering because of this behavior. Additionally, school districts may not provide enough training for teachers to be able to identify relationally aggressive behaviors and even with training, teachers may be ill equipped to respond to these behaviors. Because of incidents such as these, and the difficulty facing teachers, school districts have subsequently been forced to look at how they handle aggression in their schools and create policies accordingly.

In addition to increasing school policies, the examination of relational aggression has also become a major area of interest over the past two decades among educational professionals, academic researchers and the general public (Eslea & Smith, 2000). In fact, given the media attention paid to more sensational incidents of the consequences of bullying in the United States over the last fifteen years, many lawmakers have been mandating anti-bullying policies at the state and local level for many years (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). These policies require that schools investigate and respond to incidents of aggression (Farbish, 2011). In the case of Phoebe Prince, while school officials were aware of the abuse she was suffering (Norman & Connolly, 2011) it is unclear what response they provided, if any. Because of the tragic end to this story and too many others like (several of which were referenced above), the need for schools to be responsive to all forms of bullying has become an issue that demands attention. Given the covert nature of relational aggression, ostensibly found predominantly among girls, and highlighted in the Phoebe Prince case, it may demand further scrutiny as it is so difficult for adults to recognize.

**Research Problem**
The focus of the proposed study has several layers. The researcher will be examining the experiences of adolescent girls who perceive themselves as having been victims of relational aggression. There will also be an examination of their parents’ experiences and the parents’ understanding of the perceived behavior. Finally, the researcher will examine the perceptions of relational aggression that middle school teachers and administrators hold. The researcher is attempting to understand to extent to which there is consistency among the stakeholders involved in terms of their response to relational aggression. It is important for the researcher to understand several issues. Do girls feel their parents and school staff members are responding to them in an effective and supportive way? Do parents understand what their daughters are experiencing and do they feel school staff members are responding appropriately to their daughter’s needs? Do school staff members perceive relational aggression as a problem and do they perceive themselves as being equipped to respond appropriately to reports of relational aggression? Do teachers feel supported by their administrators in dealing with relational aggression? School should be a safe place for students to learn and interact socially with peers. These issues need to be examined to be sure appropriate responses are occurring when girls perceive that they are being victimized.

For the purpose of the proposed study, the researcher will focus on relational aggression in middle school girls. Middle school can be a particularly difficult time in a child’s life as they begin to shift their focus from the family to the peer group (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). Davidson and Demaray posit that because of this shift, middle school students are especially vulnerable to peer aggression. In a study conducted by Nansel et al., (2001), the researchers found that ninth and tenth grade students were less likely to be victimized by bullies than were middle school students. Additionally, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) surveyed 4,400 students in
middle and high schools in a large school district and found that bullying behavior peaked in middle school but decreased as students entered high school. Taken together, the above suggests that the middle school population appears to struggle more with aggressive behaviors and as students get older, these behaviors seem to subside.

To the extent that middle school students begin to drift from the family and focus on their peer group (Davidson & Demaray, 2007), parents may not be aware that their daughters are feeling victimized. Even if parents are aware, it seems there may be a possibility that they do not know how to respond to their daughter’s perceived victimization. Thus, how parents respond to their daughters’ experiences of relational aggression will also be examined. Whether or not teachers have the ability to identify relationally aggressive behaviors is also important. As noted previously, relationally aggressive behaviors are not easily observed. With physical bullying, a punch or kick is readily seen. Relationally aggressive behaviors such as cyberbullying, social exclusion and rumors are more difficult to identify, especially since many of these behaviors may not be occurring in the classroom. Whether or not relationally aggressive behaviors are difficult to identify appears to be an important point as the culture of the school and community could perhaps have an impact on preventing and intervening in relationally aggressive behavior. Are teachers being trained to identify these behaviors? Do school administrators think it is their responsibility to intervene if a student is being victimized by relationally aggressive behaviors outside of school? Do the teachers feel supported by school administration when relational aggression among students impacts their classroom? The culture of a school can potentially have an impact a parents’ ability to get help for their daughters.

**Justification for the Research Problem**
During the 1980’s and early 1990’s, aggressive behaviors among youths began to be spotlighted in Scandinavian countries (Olweus, 1995). Despite the issue of aggression being the subject of an increasing amount of research world wide, researchers in the United States entered the field later than many researchers in other countries (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008). Dan Olweus (1995), a pioneer in the study of bullying among peers, that to which he refers as peer aggression, defines bullying as the repeated exposure to negative actions by one or more students. It is important to the focus of this study to note that Olweus states that negative actions can include relationally aggressive behaviors such as “words, making faces or dirty gestures and intentional exclusion from a group” (p.197). This is similar to Crick’s and Grotpeter’s (1995) description of covert types of aggression.

Aggression among youth as a topic has continued to gain interest among researchers especially given the extent to which it is believed that violence among youth has increased (Gomes, 2007). Historically, aggression and violence were thought of specifically as a male problem. Early views held that as a group, girls were typically not aggressive. Researchers who include in their definition of bullying or peer aggression however, more covert forms of aggression, such as those described above, in addition to rumor spreading, social exclusion, isolation, and speaking to someone in a hostile tone have found that indeed, girls may be just as aggressive as boys (Olweus, 1995; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). As a result, research on aggression in girls has increased in recent years (Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Ringrose, 2006) and indeed, it has since been discovered that girls may be equally aggressive, albeit in different ways, than boys are. Crick and Groepeter (1995), for example, found that girls were more apt to employ relationally aggressive behaviors such as dirty looks, social exclusion, gossip and rumors than boys were. As such, researchers began to acknowledge that there are two types of
aggression: physical forms of bullying that are overt in nature and relational aggression, which is covert in nature (Gomes, 2007). It appears their study provides evidence of the need to further examine relational aggression in girls.

In spite of the belief that the relationally aggressive behaviors described above have been found to be more evident in girls while boys have been found to be more physically aggressive (Remillard & Lamb, 2005, Skrzypiec et al., 2011), it is important to note that boys may engage in these types of behaviors as well. Indeed, Davidson and Demaray (2007), after reviewing the literature on peer aggression, concluded that there are inconsistencies in the research about gender differences. For example, Remillard and Lamb (2005) examined relational and physical aggression and found that girls in their study reported greater levels of relational aggression than physical aggression. However, Yoon, Barton and Taiariol, (2004) reported that while relationally aggressive behavior was originally thought of to be employed by girls, a more consistent finding is that both girls and boys engage in this type of behavior yet girls are more likely to be affected on a social emotional level than boys are.

Despite any inconsistencies in the research, researchers agree that relational aggression is cause for concern among adolescent girls (Yoon et al., 2004). Crothers et al. (2005) hypothesized that since girls are expected to be “nice”, they have been socialized to express their anger and frustration in more covert ways. Gomes (2007), building upon this hypothesis suggested that the ways in which girls are socialized may lead them to act in covert ways. If, for example, girls are expected to be nice, they will try to behave in a way that fits that viewpoint. This can leave them unable to deal with anger and frustration in an effective way, which leads them to express their feelings in a way that has been seen as non-threatening such as rolling their
eyes and giving dirty looks. Hence, the use of relationally aggressive behaviors can become a coping mechanism for girls.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Odgers and Moretti (2002) reported that as of 2002 there was still much to learn about aggressive behavior in girls. In particular, it appears that qualitative studies examining aggressive behavior in girls are lacking. For example, Mishna (2004) reported that studies conducted regarding girls and aggression have been mostly quantitative in nature and lack interview data. As suggested by Smith and Brain (2000), four years prior, qualitative studies could provide further insight into the understanding of these behaviors and the types of bullying experienced. Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to understand more the phenomenon of relational aggression by uncovering nuances that surveys may not or cannot address. Conducting interviews with those people who have experience with relationally aggressive behavior can provide insight as to why these behaviors exist (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). As recently as 2010, Kistner et al. suggested that more research is needed in order to investigate gender difference in the use of relational aggression. After the researcher conducted an exhaustive review of the literature, more recent studies addressing gender differences, as well as qualitative studies on aggression in youth, still seem to be lacking and require further investigation.

Furthermore, as Mishna (2004) reported a decade ago, more attention has been paid to aggressive youths rather than to the victims of relational aggression; a review of the current literature shows that this is still the case. Perhaps equally important is that there have been relatively few studies that have examined the experiences and perceptions of parents and teachers who are affected by relationally aggressive behavior (Mishna, 2004). While Mishna reported this a decade ago, a literature review provided evidence that this continues to be
accurate. Moreover, Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener (2011) more recently found in their review of the literature on relational aggression and bullying, that there is a lack of research that specifically highlights the perceptions and understandings of the parents of children who are victims of relational aggression. Sawyer et al., (2011) similarly reported that in general, the perceptions of parents are an area that is grossly lacking in the research. Furthermore, Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, and Skoczylas (2009) have found that a qualitative study investigating teachers’ perceptions of relational aggression would add a great deal to the body of literature on aggression in girls. In the researcher’s examination of the literature, she found that the literature continues to be lacking in the area of studies that investigate teachers’ perceptions, as well as in studies examining administrators’ perceptions of bullying. In order for school districts to move forward in providing effective intervention and prevention programs in their schools, there needs to be a comprehensive qualitative examination of the perceptions of all the stakeholders involved.

In addition to the above noted deficiencies, Davidson and Demaray (2007) identified a gap in the literature around the role of social supports in dealing with bullying. In a similar vein, other research is seemingly lacking in the area of seeking help to combat peer aggression (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). A recent review of the literature indicated that research investigating this area of study continues to be lacking. This is important to the current study because it has yet to be clearly established why some girls report victimization to adults while others do not. Further, Yoon et al., (2004) stated that there is limited research to assist educators with their perceptions that prevention and intervention programs addressing peer aggression are lacking. Moreover, it has yet to be established that which stakeholders feel would be helpful to
girls in dealing with relational aggression. The present study can begin to answer those questions.

Also, despite the growing amount of literature dedicated to the study of bullying and peer aggression, there has been little attention paid to the perspectives of parents and students (Sawyer et al., 2011). The perspectives of parents and students may be important to study in that they can provide information regarding the nuances of relational aggression that teachers may not be able to observe. Additionally, parents may also provide insight into the ways in which relational aggression impacts the family system. Thus, the effect of relational aggression on the family system is an area in which stakeholders may need to know more information. In fact, Mishna, Pepler and Weiner (2006) reported that the literature is also lacking a thorough look at the impact a child’s victimization can have on the family.

Finally, there has been very little research conducted on cyberbullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). In the age of students’ increased use of technology and the vast number of social networking sites, this is an area that is in great need of examination. For example, Kowalski and Limber (2007) identified three major areas that are missing from the literature on bullying and aggressive behavior: social networking sites and other venues in which cyberbullying occurs, the specific content of cyberbullying incidents and the context in which, and the reasons why the behavior occurs. These specific areas of research are still lacking from the literature today. This study aims to address some of these gaps in the literature.

Significance of the Problem

Mishna (2004) reported a decade ago that the pervasiveness of peer victimization is well documented. Similarly, Lansford et al., (2013) stated that researchers have identified childhood aggressive behavior as an international concern. It is also clear from recent statistics and
highlighted news stories on the incidence of peer aggression in myriad forms presented above that aggressive behavior among peers remains a problem in our schools. Equally problematic, as noted above is ineffective responses to aggressive behavior. Swearer and Cary (2003), for example, conducted a study more than ten years ago in which they examined perceptions of aggression in schools. They found that 80% of middle school students felt that their teachers were unaware of the aggressive behavior in their school.

Findings from another study conducted during the same time frame as that above, examining students’ perceptions of their teachers’ responses to aggressive behavior demonstrated that 40% of 7,000 fourteen-year-old students felt that their teachers were not really interested in stopping aggression in their schools (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Another similar large-scale study examining the responses to peer aggression in which 2,766 students were surveyed found that while 58% of children surveyed who were victims of aggression reported it to their teacher, only 28% of those students reported that their teacher was able to stop the aggression. Twenty percent of the students reported that the teacher tried to stop the peer aggression but was unsuccessful, 10% said the teacher tried to stop the peer aggression and the behavior increased and 8% of students said their teacher did not respond to their report of being victimized (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005).

Such findings do not bode well for teacher response. If teachers are unaware that the behavior is occurring, they cannot respond to incidents of relational aggression. If teachers are not properly trained to respond to physical bullying that is over, how can they respond to relational aggression, which is more covert? In looking for more recent literature on this topic, despite an exhaustive search, the researcher was unable to find articles that provided more recent
statistics. Certainly, however, the statistics noted above highlight the need for teachers to be part of the solution and the lack of any more recent data heightens the need for further examination.

At least in part a result of ineffective responses, as has been shown above, peer aggression in school can have significant consequences. Beyond the tragic consequences highlighted above however, victims of relational aggression also tend to suffer from depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Yoon et al., 2004). Nansel et al., (2001) reported that research in which the characteristics of young people involved in relationally aggressive behaviors is examined has consistently found that both aggressors and victims exhibit a decrease in healthy psychosocial functioning as opposed to those young people not involved in peer aggression. Finally, in general, children who are victimized by their peers who exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors may suffer serious consequences on their social development, mental health and academic functioning (Newman, 2008). Taken together, the above provides ample evidence of the need for more studies examining the victims of relational aggression.

Despite potentially serious consequences to victims, as noted previously, relationally aggressive behaviors are subtle so they may be difficult for an outsider to identify (James et al., 2010). Sawyer et al., (2011) suggests that the way parents define relational aggression and bullying can impact whether or not a child will report being victimized and can have an impact on how parents respond to the report. They further state that despite including forms of relational aggression in their definitions of bullying, most of the parents in their study felt that physical aggression was the most serious (Sawyer et al., 2011). Consequently, this can create a problem for girls who are being victimized by relationally aggressive peers. Because of the parents’ views that physical aggression is more serious, girls may not report incidents of relational aggression for fear that it will not be perceived as a serious issue.
Both parents and teachers face a number of challenges in recognizing and responding to the different types of peer aggression and more specifically, the indirect forms of aggression that are characteristic of relationally aggressive behaviors (Mishna et al., 2006). For example, Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Weiner (2005) studied teachers’ perceptions of relational aggression and found that teachers had difficulty recognizing when students were being victimized, and even when they did recognize the behavior, found it a challenge to know how to respond. Mishna et al., (2005) also found that teachers had the most difficulty recognizing relationally aggressive behaviors in their classrooms. More recently, James et al., (2010) suggests that because this type of aggression is not as straight forward as physical bullying, it presents a challenge for girls, their parents and their teachers. If teachers are being trained to recognize relationally aggressive behaviors in their classrooms and they are still struggling to identify the behavior, it stands to reason that parents would have difficulty recognizing these behaviors as well.

It seems apparent, based on the above, that relational aggression is a topic in need of an in depth examination. Given the difficulty teachers face in identifying and responding to relational aggression, as well as the struggle parents face in identifying these behaviors, relational aggression needs a closer look. Further, in light of the tragic effects that relational aggression can have on its victims, it would seem that stakeholders must address this problem in schools.

**Positionality Statement**

As both a teacher and a clinical social worker, I have had much experience working with both victims and perpetrators of aggressive behaviors. On a personal level, because of this experience and my observations, I have always held the viewpoint that boys tend to get in
physical fights and then it is over while girls tend to do what they can to socially devastate each other. Clients and students have been victims of relational aggression over extended periods of time and more than once, I have had an adolescent girl in my office reporting that she either wanted to die or retaliate with violence because of the abuse. Teachers did not see what was going on in their classrooms so even when the abuse was reported, it was difficult to prove. This left the girls feeling unheard and feeling that they had no other way to escape the abuse but end their lives or become violent to protect themselves.

Now, as a mother of two pre-adolescent girls, I have seen on a daily basis how relational aggression is part of girls’ lives. My daughters have talked to me about the aggressive behavior that is prominent in their school. After speaking with many of their friends, I discovered that many girls are not talking to their parents about this behavior, nor are they reporting it to their teachers. My daughters have often reported to me that they are worried about their friends because they are being victimized. Relational aggression has presented a unique problem in my daughters’ school because the teachers are often stuck in a “she said-she said” battle. In addition, the cyberbullying that happens occurs most often outside of school. Physical bullying, the more overt kind of behaviors, is much easier for the teachers and parents to recognize.

In both my clinical practice and my classroom, I have had many incidents reported to me in which clients and students perceived their peers victimized them. It was a struggle to get school staff and administration to respond to these incidents. It is my belief, based on my experience, that teachers and administrators are not responsive enough to girls who are experiencing relational aggression. As a social worker advocating for clients, I was often told that since teachers did not see what happened, they could not respond to it. This bias, in which my belief is that schools do not do enough to help victimized girls, needed to be monitored
throughout the data collection process. I was sure to not ask leading questions that might have encouraged a negative commentary on schools. I also allowed for reports of positive school responses and ensure that during the data analysis process, all the experiences with schools that the participants shared were considered.

In addition, because of my clinical training, I am able to identify nuances in girls’ behavior that an average educator may not be able to see. I observe group dynamics and can identify relationally aggressive behavior even when in it is in its most subtle form. Therefore, conducting focus groups afforded me an opportunity to observe those behaviors and, in turn, this added to my understanding of the problem.

**Research Questions**

This researcher planned to investigate the experiences of adolescent girls who perceive they had been victims of relational aggression as well as the experiences and perceptions of the adults involved, including parents, teachers, and administrators. In addition, this researcher will also examined how girls respond to their perceived victimization. Did the girls report their victimization to adults? This was important to the study because the researcher was also examining whether or not girls reported their victimization to adults and the reasons behind those choices. Further, it was important to examine the perceptions of teacher and administrators in order to understand their response to the behavior. Because of these considerations, this researcher posed the following research questions:

1. What is the experience of middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized by relational aggression and how have these girls responded?
2. What are the other stakeholders’ (parents, teachers, school administrators) perspectives on the issues and challenges confronted by middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized and in what ways have these adults responded?

3. What are the girls’ experiences of the stakeholders’ response to their perceived victimization?

**Theoretical Framework**

Swearer and Espelage (2004) stated that the phenomenon of bullying, and therefore, relational aggression, has to be understood in the context of the individual, family, peer group, school and community. In other words, relational aggression is not something that occurs in isolation; there are peer group, family, school and community influences at work. Consequently, relationally aggressive behavior is either encouraged or discouraged as a result of these influences (Swearer & Espelage, 2004).

Thus, these influences are important when considering how people respond to relational aggression. Unfortunately, the dynamics of peer aggression can potentially permeate throughout the entire school community. Because of this, a systems-ecological framework is necessary to address the complex issue of relational aggression and the ways in which people respond (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Mishna, 2004; Sawyer et al., 2011; Barboza et al., 2009). According to the systems-ecological framework (also referred to as the social-ecological framework, (Barboza et al., 2009)) the dynamics of relational aggression extend beyond the aggressor and victim and include the school, the peer group, the family and community as well as the individuals involved (Sawyer et al., 2011). Consequently, Davidson and Demaray (2007) stated that any research in the area of peer aggression should be grounded in this framework and subsequently examine the impact of peer group, family, school and community influences in order to effectively develop intervention programs. They further stated that it is important to
examine the structures that could provide assistance for youth involved in relational aggression. For example, this could include social support from peers, parents and teachers (Davidson & Demaray, 2007).

While Barboza et al. (2009) agreed that peer aggression is a relationship between the aggressor and the victim, they stated the parties’ individual characteristics have played out in a variety of contexts across their peer group, family, school and community. Examining the relationship between youths and these contexts can help in the understanding of the degree to which the various contexts (such as the family) help encourage or inhibit relational aggression. To illustrate, Swearer and Espelage (2004) described a child as being at the center of the social ecological model. There are individual factors, such as gender and age that can encourage or discourage relationally aggressive behavior. Gender, for example, has an influence on relationally aggressive behavior such that girls, as a consequence of the ways in which they have been socialized, are more likely to engage in relational, rather than physical aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In addition to factors of gender and age, the individual is part of a family system. A system-ecological framework allows the examination into whether or not the family encourages or discourages aggressive behavior. Also, a child’s social ecology includes their peer group and school setting. The systems-ecological framework affords the researcher the opportunity to look at the culture of the peer group and school to examine the impact on aggression. Finally, the peer group, family and school setting are all part of the bigger community. It is important to investigate if the community is supporting aggressive behavior or helping to inhibit it. The system-ecological framework allows the researcher to examine all of these aspects of a child’s life.
The contexts described above make up four inter-related subsystems that afford researchers the opportunity to understand human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). These sub-systems are called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem. Thus, examination of a single subject must take into account all of these sub-systems and how the individual interacts with each one. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), a microsystem is the relationships an individual has in their immediate environment. Next, the mesosystem comprises of the environment an individual is a part of at a particular stage in their life. Then, the exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem that includes specific social structures; and finally, the macrosystem is the umbrella of the institutional patterns of the culture in which the individual exists. In addition, Bronfenbrenner (1977) identifies the chronosystem, which represents the effect of time on the behavior and the context on which it occurs. A description of these sub-systems explained in the context of youths and relational aggression will follow.

According to the systems-ecological framework, the relationship between a child and one system is the microsystem. In other words, the microsystem is the relationship the child has with their immediate environment (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). For example, if the child is at home, the system involved in the microsystem is the child’s family. Thus, a child’s microsystem can change throughout the day depending on where they are. It can be the child’s peer group, the school environment or the home environment. In other words, in terms of relationally aggressive behaviors and where they may occur, this pertains to any environment in which the child is engaged at any given moment through the day. This can also include others’ reactions to relationally aggressive behavior, whether positive or negative, such as the support a child receives in school or parental involvement or interference in the aggressive relationship (Barboza et al., 2009).
The next system, the mesosystem, consists of the relationships between major settings in a particular stage of a person’s life that may have a more general influence, regardless of where a child may be located. For children, this includes any influence of their school. To clarify, the mesosystem differs from the microsystem in that the mesosystem can include the child’s school, church, organizations and clubs that the child may belong to while the microsystem includes only those settings in which the child is located at any given time. Moreover, the mesosystem can include the relationship between the systems in a child’s life, such as the home and school environments (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). As a matter of fact, this relationship is significant because it can illustrate the harmony or discord the two systems have regarding relationally aggressive behavior. Further, Barboza et al., (2009) reported that the mesosystem can have a profound impact on a child’s development. For example, parent-teacher collaboration can be a significant factor in whether or not relationally aggressive behavior occurs. In addition, it can mitigate or prevent the damage from relational aggression and can have a significant impact on the safety and welfare of both individuals.

Beyond that, the mesosystem extends out and includes other social structures that are both formal and informal. This system that includes other social structures is called the exosystem. The exosystem can include such social structures as informal social networks, the neighborhood in which an adolescent lives, the mass media and local and state government. Further, it can also include structures such as anti-bullying policies in schools and parental involvement in a school system. In addition, the exosystem can include specific teacher trainings to reduce relational aggression as well (Barboza et al., 2009). While the exosystem does not necessarily involve the adolescent directly, this system can have an influence or even dictate what occurs within the adolescents’ environment.
Lastly, the macrosystem is the umbrella of social patterns of the culture. This system includes the social culture of a community, the educational system, the legal system and the political systems. Further, the macrosystem helps determine how the exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem will function. In regards to relational aggression, the macrosystem is the larger society norms around this issue. For example, it consists of the different components that affect the safety and welfare of individuals. In addition, the macrosystem includes societal attitudes towards violence. Consequently, this system determines whether or not aggression is seen as “boys will be boys” or “girls will be girls” behavior (Barboza et al., 2009). In other words, is relational aggression tolerated? Similarly, is it prohibited or responded to? The macrosystem sets the larger tone around the issue of relational aggression.

In addition to these four sub-systems, Barboza et al., (2009) identified the chronosystem as the effect that time can have on relational aggression. In other words, this effect can be with the behavior itself, such as an increase or decrease over time in the relationally aggressive behaviors an adolescent engages in. Moreover, the effect can also dictate whether societal attitudes regarding relational aggression change over the course of time. Given that relational aggression is thought of as happening over a period of time, the chronosystem provides some stability to the aggressive behavior. Further, Barboza et al., (2009) reported that in order to have an intervention program that is ecologically informed, it is important to understand that the chronosystem can be influenced over time. This can change the welfare of individuals and their relationships for the positive or negative, such as the support a child receives in school and parental involvement or interference in the bullying relationship (Barboza et al., 2009). Likewise, this change over time can be due to developmental factors involved with the children themselves.
Chapter II: Literature Review

A review of the literature addressing relational aggression was completed. Due to the gaps in the literature around the specific issue of relational aggression, a review of the studies conducted that examined bullying behavior was completed as well. Of the literature reviewed, only about a dozen studies touch upon parents’, teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of bullying behavior and their subsequent responses to the behavior. Additionally, research on bullying is a relatively new area of study and research that examines aggression among girls, specifically relational aggression, is an even more recent area of study. Thus, in light of the fact that this is a recent area of study, the majority of the studies used in this review were conducted within the last 17 years. Moreover, most of the studies utilized in this review address aggression in girls, however, given the controversy over whether or not girls are as aggressive as boys, studies that address aggression in boys were reviewed as well. Because relational aggression is bullying behavior in which the aggression is exhibited in a more covert way, the articles in this review include studies examining bullying as well as relational aggression in order to underscore the impact this behavior has on youths. Further, due to the increasing use of technology and the number of social networking sites available to youths, studies examining cyberbullying are also included in this review. Additionally, the literature review includes the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a psychologist who is credited with developing the systems-ecological theory. Finally, also included in this literature review are news articles about adolescents who have taken their own lives due to ongoing bullying and harassment, highlighting some of the consequences of bullying.

In reviewing the literature that has examined girls’ aggression, four themes seem to emerge. The first is the impact of bullying on both victims and the aggressors. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have examined the consequences of bullying and its effect on children
and adolescents. The second theme highlights the social implications of aggression and whether or not youths choose to report the bullying behavior. These studies focus on reporting to peers, parents and teachers and the reasons why youths choose or choose not to report. The third theme that emerges is the perception that students, parents, teachers and administrators have of bullying and relational aggression. Studies have shown differing perceptions between the parties and this is an area that has not been extensively examined. The final theme identified in the literature is cyberbullying among youths. In the age of advanced technology and social media, it is becoming easier for aggressors to reach their victims. This creates a unique problem for schools in that much of the aggressive behavior among girls may be happening outside of the school environment.

**Theme One: Effects of Relational Aggression**

Having some level of conflict in any relationship is to be expected. However, when that conflict is paired with taunts, threats, physical aggression, social exclusion, rumors and harassment, children can experience anger, sadness and loneliness (Newman, 2008). Likewise, Remillard and Lamb (2005) reported that based on their research, relational aggression can cause distress in girls who are victimized. Additionally, while a certain amount of conflict in relationships is normal, Nansel et al., (2001) reported that being victimized by aggressive behavior could be detrimental to healthy development in youths. Moreover, Newman (2008) suggested that being victimized by peers poses a serious threat to youths’ social-emotional states as well as their academic functioning. A more in depth look at these effects follows

**Social Emotional Effects.** Aggressive behavior among youths is highlighted when there are devastating events such as school shootings and suicides that occur as a result of peer aggression. However, students do not just make the leap to engaging in these violent behaviors
in order to cope with, or stop their victimization. In fact, there are a number of negative consequences that youths suffer when they are victimized before these types of events are in the news. Unfortunately, bullying and relational aggression has had an impact on a significant number of children and is linked to poor social adjustment in youths (Konishi & Hymel, 2009). Additionally, Carney (2008) reported that peer aggression could lead to many negative outcomes, including physical, emotional and social issues that develop and can have a long-term impact on the youths involved. Consequently, children and adolescents who are victimized by relational aggression tend to suffer from depression, anxiety and have low self-esteem (Yoon et al., 2004). In addition, self-reports on social-psychological adjustment surveys have shown that relational aggression is significantly correlated with depression, loneliness and social isolation (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). There is also evidence that in addition to internalizing stress that can lead to social isolation, depression and anxiety, girls may also externalize the stress and develop anger and hostility (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). Moreover, McCabe et al., (2003) found that these issues could be carried into adulthood. In their study, the authors reported that memories of childhood teasing could cause social anxiety in adulthood (McCabe et al., 2003). This is a significant finding in that it illustrates the long-term effects that peer aggression can have on a person’s life.

Furthermore, Nishina et al., (2005) found that students who perceived themselves as being frequent targets of relational aggression were more depressed, lonely and anxious than those students who did not perceive themselves as being frequent targets. In addition, the findings of a study conducted by McCabe et al., (2003) offered evidence for a link between the perception of being teased and bullied and developing social phobias. This point illustrates that even having the perception of being victimized can have adverse effects on students.
Additionally, the frequency in which girls are relationally victimized can also present a concern. For example, Carney (2008) found that the frequency with which students were exposed to peer aggression was a significant predictor in determining levels of trauma. Consequently, students who report frequent victimization report feeling badly about themselves in general (Nishina et al., 2005). These students often report having difficulty making friends and they report that their relationships with classmates are poor (Nansel et al., 2001). Consequently, this can create a cycle in which students become greater targets for victimization. When students have poor peer relationships and no friends, they are socially isolated from the group and sometimes lack social skills, which can cause them to be victimized more (Nansel et al., 2001).

Specifically, there is evidence that engaging in relationally aggressive behaviors has negative consequences on girls. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found in a self-report study that girls who are relationally aggressive are unhappy and distressed about their peer relationships. In addition, it has been found that youths who are involved in peer aggression exhibit poorer social functioning than their peers who are not involved in aggressive behaviors (Nansel et al., 2001). Further, Nansel et al., (2001) found that youths who are aggressive towards peers and are victims of aggression might be at a significantly higher risk to develop social-emotional problems. Moreover, Odgers and Moretti (2002) postulated that aggressive girls suffer from a wide range of mental health issues. Consequently, girls who are relationally aggressive are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors that are consistent with Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder (Yoon et al., 2004). Furthermore, Ringrose (2006) stated that relationally aggressive girls might need to receive mental health treatment in order to prevent negative consequences such as depression, anxiety, peer rejection or worse.
Academic Effects. Relational aggression can have an impact on the life of a student in a variety of different ways. For example, when the emotional effects described above occur, it can become more difficult for students to attend to their academic responsibilities. Additionally, Nishina et al., (2005) found in their study that these emotional effects caused students to become disengaged in school. As a result, this disengagement from school can have a profound impact on students’ grades and has the potential to lead to gaps in learning. Further, as students become older, disengagement from school could possibly cause students to drop out of school, which can, in turn, have an impact on the family and the community (unemployment, crime, family discord).

Besides the issue of school disengagement, relational aggression can impact a youth’s attendance in school. Indeed, Duncan (2004) found that many girls who were victimized in school avoided going to school in order to protect themselves. In addition to avoiding going to school, girls requested transfers to other schools in order to escape the aggressive behaviors of their peers. For instance, Amanda Todd transferred to several different schools in order to avoid being harassed (Mungin, 2012). Because Amanda was cyberbullied, it was very easy to find videos taunting her with a quick Internet search. In the age of increased technology, this is a frightening example of how dangerous the Internet may be for students and how difficult it can be to escape harassment by peers.

In addition to avoiding school, students may feel so unsafe that they carry weapons to school in order to protect themselves. Notably, Bauman (2008) found that students who are victimized by aggressive behavior are missing school more often than their peers who are not victimized and that students may carry weapons to school with the belief that bullies will leave them alone. The Columbine school shooting is an example of such a consequence. In fact, Tom
Klebold, the father of Dylan Klebold, who was one of the shooters in the Columbine massacre reported that his son was an outcast in school and was frequently victimized by his peers which Tom feels contributed to what was considered to be the worst school shooting in United States history (Coffman, 2012). Further, Bauman (2008) reports that the issue of students bringing weapons to school highlights the need for taking preventative action to solve the problem of peer aggression.

Similarly, Nansel et al., (2001) found that students who were aggressive towards their peers also exhibited problems with academic functioning. For example, they found that students were more likely to be involved in other problem behaviors as well such as drinking and smoking (Nansel et al., 2001). Their academic achievement suffered, as did their perception of their school climate. Interestingly, Nansel et al., (2001) also found that in self-reports, students who were aggressive reported ease in making friends. This study indicates that aggressive youths are not as socially isolated as their victimized peers.

**Contrasting Viewpoints.** While the majority of the literature in this review provides evidence for negative consequences of relational aggression and bullying, there are researchers who challenge that viewpoint. Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin (2008) reported that aggression researchers have not succeeded in identifying any long-term consequences to aggressive behavior. Further, Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) raised the concern that the media has played an influential role in making girls seem like they are violent and out of control when that may not be accurate. Moreover, Lentendre (2007) reported that the increased attention to girls’ aggression has resulted in movies and magazines showing girls using direct and indirect methods of aggression to manipulate their relationships. It is further stated that in order to gain gender equality, researchers are seeking new ways to cheapen girls and make them seem
villainous (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). The authors argue that relational aggression may not be a negative behavior and is not necessarily indicative of future physical violence; this type of aggression could be indicative of a girl’s higher intelligence (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Similarly, Remillard and Lamb (2005) also state that gossiping, one of the characteristics of relational aggression, can be a positive thing with girls because it can build camaraderie among groups.

In addition, Lentendre (2007) reported that there are socio-cultural restrictions on how girls can express their feelings. For example, the author stated that these restrictions consequently teach girls to express their feelings in covert ways, which can be the gateway to relationally aggressive behaviors. Moreover, Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) report that girls are encouraged not to express their frustrations. Because they are discouraged from expressing their feelings, girls have a tendency to be frustrated with other girls who are equally as powerless. Consequently, their need to resolve this inner conflict can manifest itself in relationally aggressive behaviors. It is further stated that girls develop these covert ways of dealing with their feelings because they are unsupported in learning how to directly manage their emotions (Lentendre, 2007). Lentendre and Smith (2011) expanded on Lentendre’s earlier work (2007) and reported that not only are girls unsupported in dealing directly with their emotions, for them to deal with their emotions directly is deemed socially unacceptable. As a result of this pressure, girls resort to using their higher social intelligence to manipulate their relationships. In addition, Crothers et al., (2005) reported that there is a social expectation that girls be nice. Gomes (2007) concurred and reported that it is possible that this social expectation, and the socialization of females in general, result in relationally aggressive behaviors.

**Theme Two: Social Implications/Coping Strategies**
**Friendships/Social Contexts.** As the name implies, relational aggression can be used to manipulate relationships in an aggressive manner. In fact, Guerra, Williams and Sadek (2011) conducted a study that utilized surveys and focus groups and found relationally aggressive behavior to be ingrained in a fluid social context. Females tend to exhibit aggressive tendencies toward other females by harassing them rather than employing physical violence (Letendre, 2007). This can be done within the context of close friendships or with acquaintances.

Certainly, it is possible that girls think relationally aggressive behaviors serve a purpose in managing their social power so they become more popular (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004). For example, Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) found that girls reported power, popularity and status as reasons for using relationally aggressive behaviors on their peers. In fact, girls may be motivated to use relationally aggressive behaviors in order to gain or maintain social power and dominance (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Further, Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) stated that relational aggression could be used to manipulate social worlds. This can be damaging to both the victim and the aggressor but the behavior is seen as serving a purpose for the aggressor. In sum, use of this type of behavior allows girls to seek power in relationships while still meeting the social expectation that girls will be nice (Crothers et al., 2005).

As girls get older, their friendships become more important. Consequently, relational aggression can cause a disruption to those friendships, which can, in turn, make girls feel like their social lives are collapsing (James et al., 2010). Thus, any type of injury to an intimate friendship, a girl’s social reputation or to her social status is likely to be seen as a tremendous threat (Yoon et al., 2004). This can cause significant problems with peer relationships. Moreover, Remillard and Lamb (2005) found in their study that when relational aggression occurs, the degree to which the victim is hurt is dependent on how close the girls were. In other
words, if there is relationally aggressive behavior exhibited between two close friends, the victim is likely to feel more pain and humiliation because the aggression was perpetrated by someone she cares about. Further, the authors found that following the incident, the girls were able to repair, maintain and reinforce their close relationship (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). That is to say that while relational aggression involving two close friends may cause emotional harm, it does not have to end the friendship between the girls. In fact, girls not only maintained their friendships but there was evidence to show that the friendships became stronger following an incident of relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). The authors postulated that the reason for this may be that relational aggression may not be as hurtful to girls as originally thought or that girls have the coping mechanisms to deal with these behaviors and negotiate with others to solve problems.

Additionally, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported it is possible that issues with peers may be a precipitant to relational aggression. For example, problems with friends may cause girls to act out in ways that they would not have before. Moreover, Lentendre (2007) reported that girls who are aggressive in general may be ostracized by their socially appropriate peers and because of this, will form friendships with other aggressive girls. Consequently, these girls may feel that fighting is a way to handle themselves, to keep the persona of being tough and to problem solve. It is also suggested that girls who engage in relationally aggressive behaviors are more disliked by their peers (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). For example, the authors found the general population typically rejected girls who engaged in aggressive behaviors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Although girls who perceived themselves as tough were found to employ relationally aggressive behaviors, they were not the only girls found to engage in this type of behavior. In
fact, Crothers et al., (2005) found that girls who felt they had more feminine qualities thought of themselves as being capable of exhibiting relationally aggressive behavior. In addition, girls viewed relational aggression as a means for them to enhance their physical and sexual appeal. Moreover, these girls reported that they were likely to use relational aggression to eliminate romantic competition through rumors, gossip and exclusion (Guerra et al., 2011).

**Coping Strategies/Social Supports.** The role of coping strategies and social supports in dealing with bullying continues to be examined. The level of social support one feels is usually determined by the individual’s perceptions regarding how supported they feel by others (Konishi & Hymel, 2009). In other words, if girls feel that generally, people support them, they will report that they have an increased level of social support. Remillard and Lamb (2005) postulated that social supports might allow girls to vent to others rather than confronting an issue, which may, in turn, preserve friendships. If girls have an avenue in which to express their frustrations, they may be less prone to exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors as a way to deal with frustration.

Similarly, one of the most important findings in Davidson and Demaray’s study (2007), was that support from parents, teachers and friends can minimize the effects of relational aggression on an individual’s stress level. In fact, Konishi and Hymel (2009) found in their study that social support from children’s families could be protecting them from the negative consequences of stress that can arise from relational aggression. Further, the authors reported that effective coping skills could minimize the impact of significant stressors on children’s lives (Konishi & Hymel, 2009). Moreover, Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor and Chauhan (2004) found that effective social supports are an asset to a victimized child and that this is a useful strategy in responding to relational aggression and bullying.
While researchers have found that effective coping skills have a positive effect on an adolescent’s response to relational aggression, Barboza et al., (2009) found that a lack of social supports might cause peer aggression to occur. The authors stated that deficits in social supports or the type of social supports provided by parents, teachers and friends could have an impact on the level of relational aggression that occurs (Barboza et al., 2009). In other words, girls who don’t have supports may be more of a target for their aggressive peers. Also, those girls who do not have effective social supports report a greater level of stress, which can, in turn, cause psychological and behavioral problems such as relational aggression (Konishi & Hymel, 2009). Conversely, this same study found that girls who felt they had a high level of social supports reported low levels of stress (Konishi & Hymel, 2009).

Additionally, it is important that researchers studying coping strategies and social supports take a child’s gender into consideration. Girls typically use a wider range of coping strategies and are more likely to seek out social support (Skrzypiec et al., 2011). For example, they seek out support in order to vent, to cope with their feelings, and also to get help. However, Newman et al., (2001) reported that girls who consider themselves to be unpopular might not have confidence in their ability to resolve conflict with peers. Consequently, this may cause these girls to reach out and seek support in order to effectively deal with their relationship issues. Furthermore, researchers have found that girls are more likely than boys to seek out support or use problem solving strategies in order to cope with relational aggression Skrzypiec et al., 2011; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). In addition, Skrzypiec et al., (2011) stated that help seeking can be seen as a normal coping strategy for girls but is not seen as a normal strategy for boys. In other words, seeking help served as a way for victimized girls to minimize their risk for social
problems; however, this way of coping was found not to be an effective strategy for boys (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

An additional factor in whether or not girls employ the use of coping skills is the environment in which the relational aggression is taking place. For example, Newman (2008) found that if the classroom expectation is for students to resolve conflicts on their own, seeking help could have unwanted ramifications for those that do. Because of this powerful deterrent, girls may not reach out for assistance in dealing with relational aggression. Additionally, Newman et al., (2001) found that seeking help or utilizing social supports is a way to avoid solving a conflict. Instead of resolving interpersonal conflicts on their own, girls who seek out support may be seen in a negative light.

**Reporting Relational Aggression.** Whether or not children report incidents of relational aggression plays a big role in how these behaviors get addressed. If adults are unaware of aggressive behavior, it may not get responded to. Given that, it is important to understand why children turn to others for support in dealing with relational aggression (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004). Also, it is important to understand whom they tell as well as the reasons why (Hunter et al., 2004). Having an understanding of these issues will assist those in charge of responding to incidents of peer aggression. Interestingly, Hunter et al., (2004) found that younger students usually report incidents of peer aggression more often than older students. Moreover, Mishna et al., (2006) found that children would only report being victimized by aggressive behavior if they perceived the behavior to be serious enough. Similarly, Unnever and Cornell (2004) found that the type of aggressive behavior could dictate whether or not a victim will seek help and report the incident. In short, girls report their victimization more than boys do
and incidents of direct or physical bullying is more reported than incidents of indirect bullying or relational aggression (Hunter et al., 2004).

In working with students who are experiencing relational aggression, one needs to understand the value of creating an environment in which students feel comfortable reporting their victimization. Mishna (2004) stated that if students do not feel heard and do not feel that their feelings and experiences are validated, they might lose the confidence needed to report their victimization to adults. Typically, children and adolescents are directed to report any victimization to school personnel and they are also encouraged to report any incidents to their parents (Hunter et al., 2004). Without a culture of listening to those concerns, students may opt not to report any concerns. For example, Unnever and Cornell (2004) found that students were less likely to report relational aggression or bullying if they felt that their school tolerated such behavior. Additionally, students who were victimized were less likely to come forward to report the behavior if they felt that the school had a culture that supports bullying (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). This speaks to the message that the school staff sends in their response to aggressive behavior. For instance, a school may have strict anti-bullying policies but if students do not see the effects of the implementation of those policies, they may have the perception that aggression is tolerated. To illustrate this point, Fekkes et al., (2005) found in their study that students were not reporting incidents of aggression and the authors discussed the need for schools to send a strong message that relational aggression and bullying are not tolerated. Sending a strong message regarding the tolerance level and reporting of peer aggression requires a culture in which all members of the community have an awareness of whether or not this behavior is accepted. For example, researchers reported that school staff members need to create an environment in which students felt encouraged to report their victimization (Fekkes et al., 2005).
In order to create an environment that promotes reporting peer aggression, all staff within the school will need to be invested in this process. It does not help to have students report aggression if the teachers do not respond; nor is it effective to have teachers report aggressive incidents if the school administrators do not follow through with an appropriate response on their level. To demonstrate this point Fekkes et al., (2005) reported that 58% of students in their study reported peer aggression incidents. Of that 58%, 28% of the students reported that the teacher’s response was effective in stopping the aggression; 20% of students said the teacher tried to stop the aggression but was unsuccessful; 10% of the students said that having the teacher respond made the situation worse and 8% of students said the teacher did not attempt to stop the aggressive behavior. Under those circumstances, anti-bullying policies may not be effective if school staff members do not attempt to respond to the situation.

Teachers are not the only stakeholders that students are reaching out to in order to report their victimization. For instance, several studies found that middle school students are significantly more likely to report peer victimization to someone at home than they are to someone at school (Eslea & Smith, 2000; Fekkes et al., 2005; Whitney & Smith 1993). In addition to reporting aggression to people at home, students are also reporting aggressive behavior to their friends. In fact, Unnever and Cornell (2004) reported that girls found it was easier to report aggressive behavior to their peers rather than seek help from an adult while boys tend to tell adults. Because girls tend to count on their relationships with friends as a means of social support, they may find it easier to report their victimization to peers (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

While students are encouraged to reach out and report their victimization, asking for help does not mean that students are seeking to avoid conflict (Newman et al., 2001). In particular,
the student may have realized they cannot resolve the issue on her own, or the student may be motivated by the need to get the aggressor in trouble (Newman et al., 2001). Similarly, not seeking help does not mean the student can handle the issue on her own. In fact, not reporting aggression may mean that the student is hesitant due to the fear of retaliation from the aggressor (Newman et al., 2001). In addition, students may feel that requesting help will not solve the problem (Newman et al., 2001). Moreover, Smith, Shu, and Madsen (2001) found that older students may not seek out help because of their wish to become more independent. These students may also feel that seeking out help may damage their peer status if they are looked at as a person who cannot solve their own problems (Smith et al., 2001). Likewise, younger students identified subsequent issues with the aggressor and having their peers not like them as reasons for not reporting aggression (Mishna et al., 2006). Further, Batsche and Knoff (2004) suggested that girls who do not report their victimization might feel that school personnel may not understand what they are going through or that school staff members are unable to help protect them. Consequently, girls may feel alone in their struggles with relational aggression.

**Theme Three: Perceptions and Attitudes of Students, Parents and School Staff**

In addition to examining the role of reporting and use of coping skills in peer aggression, it is important to examine the perceptions that students, parents and school staff hold regarding aggression. Despite the acknowledgement that relational aggression happens most in school, there has been increasing attention paid to how the family is affected by these incidents. In fact, the way in which the family has been socialized and the relationship the victim has with her siblings can help define an aggressive incident to girls (Barboza et al., 2009). Additionally, in a study conducted by Mishna et al., (2006), adults reported that their own experiences with peer aggression as a youth has made them more sensitive and aware of the nuances of relational
aggression and subsequently better able to help their daughters deal with this type of victimization. Thus, girls may feel more supported by their parents in families such as these because of the views the parents have regarding their daughter’s victimization.

Because of the covert nature of the behaviors involved in relational aggression, this type of peer aggression presents more of a challenge to girls, parents and educators (James et al., 2010). In addition, Mishna et al., (2006) stated that while recognizing the diverse forms of bullying remains a challenge for parents and educators, the bigger challenge remains in identifying the nuances of behaviors such as social exclusion that are indicative of relationally aggressive interactions. Consequently, recognizing and responding to relationally aggressive behavior is very complex for both girls and the adults in their daily lives (Mishna, 2004). Often, parents and teachers may struggle with responding to reports of relationally aggressive behaviors because they did not witness the interaction (Yoon et al., 2004). This is important to the present study; adults need to be able to identify these behaviors in order to respond effectively. In other words, identifying these behaviors and understanding that they are characteristic of relationally aggressive behaviors is the first step in combatting this issue. Although these behaviors are covert in nature and not easily seen, they can have a significant impact on the victim (James et al., 2010). Because of this, it is important for researchers to understand the perceptions that girls, parents and teachers have regarding relational aggression (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Duong, 2011). Having an understanding of the perceptions that are held may guide and inform the creation of intervention and prevention programs in schools (Waasdorp et al., 2011). Moreover, Sawyer et al., (2011) reported that having a more in depth understanding of parents and teacher perceptions will afford researchers the opportunity to understand the factors regarding parents’ and teachers’ ability to identify relationally aggressive behavior. As a result, having an
understanding about the adults’ perceptions could potentially assist in the formation of effective anti-bullying policies and programs.

**Girls’/Parent’s Perceptions.** In order to respond appropriately to their daughter’s victimization, parents need to have an understanding that relationally aggressive behavior may have an effect on their daughter’s emotional wellbeing. For example, Mishna et al., (2006) found that parents had the general perception that relational aggression was just a normal part of growing up. In addition, Eslea and Smith (2000) reported that the parents in their study had the perception that any type of bullying or aggressive behavior was inevitable in schools. Further, parents in another study felt that aggressive behavior among students is a normal part of growing up and something that kids just do (Sawyer et al., 2011). Moreover, Sawyer et al., (2011) also found that most parents in their study did not know that their child was considered a victim until the parent was a participant in the study. More importantly, parents in this study felt that aggressive behavior among students happens all the time and that it is a normal part of growing up so they were not surprised to hear their child was being teased (Sawyer et al., 2011).

Additionally, Mishna (2004) found this in her study and reported that a mother felt that aggressive behavior in school was a benign behavior, not to be too concerned about. Similarly, Mishna (2004) found there was a difference in perceptions among children and their parents; she found that a child would describe an incident as peer aggression while the parent would not. Interestingly, Mishna et al., (2006) found that most adults had pre-conceived notions as to how a victimized child would present themselves. For example, the adults felt that the child would present as not well adjusted, sad and/or sullen and would be easily visible among other children. In addition to this, some parents felt that since their child has a lot of friends, they were not vulnerable to bullying or relational aggression (Sawyer et al., 2011). In fact, parents had the
perception that being liked would protect their child from aggressive behavior perpetrated by their child’s peers.

Despite this perception, even when a girl has a lot of friends in school, she is not above being victimized. In fact, relational aggression among friends remains a concern. Boyer (2010) conducted a narrative study examining a girl’s experience with relational aggression in school. Three generations of the family were interviewed and the findings illustrated the importance of family members to have an understanding of the nuances involved in relational aggression. Despite the report that the girl in this study had significant physical and emotional effects from being a victim of relational aggression, the adults in her life felt that the girls involved were too young to engage in these types of behaviors and that since the girls involved were friends with their daughter/granddaughter, the behavior was not cause for concern (Boyer, 2010). Further, the parents reported that they believed schools were a safe place, so their daughter could not be victimized by one of her friends (Boyer, 2010). Similarly, Mishna et al., (2006) studied relational aggression among friends and discovered that parents find it a challenge to determine whether or not their daughter is a victim of relational aggression when the other child involved is a friend. In fact, Mishna (2004) found that some mothers felt their daughters just picked friends who were manipulative rather than looking at the behavior they employed as being relationally aggressive. As a result, some parents struggled to decipher who was more responsible for the conflict between the two girls and felt that each girl shared the responsibility for the conflict (Mishna, 2004). Moreover, some parents would minimize the conflict by telling their daughters they would be friends with the aggressor again the next day so they should forget what happened. In addition, parents reported feeling that their daughters had to learn how to problem
solve incidents of relational aggression on their own because it is a common occurrence (Mishna, 2004).

In spite of the reports that parents feel they are more sensitive to the nuances of relational aggression, Landau, Milich, Harris, and Larson (2001) found that adults might fail to fully understand just how upsetting this type of aggression is to girls. There is also the concern that parents may not take their daughter’s reports of bullying seriously. For example, in a study conducted by Mishna et al., (2006), one mother reported feeling conflicted because her daughter tended to exaggerate so she did not know if she could believe her daughter’s reports of being victimized. In addition, parents have reported not having significant concerns about their daughter’s perceived victimization. In fact, in another study, one father questioned whether or not his child was the cause of the relationally aggressive behavior (Sawyer et al., 2011). He wondered if his daughter made some girls angry and if they were trying to retaliate for what his daughter had done. These perspectives are important to understand because they can dictate how parents respond to reports of peer aggression. For example, Eslea and Smith (2000) report that in their study, parents agreed that their children should know how to stand up for themselves; this finding illustrates how parents still hold the view that children should work out issues of peer aggression on their own, rather than involving adults.

Indeed, the research has shown some differences in the way children and parents view relational aggression. To illustrate, in a study conducted by Landau et al., (2001) the authors found that children identified being teased as hurtful where their parents felt it should not be hurtful. This is a significant finding because if a girl perceives a behavior as hurtful and her parents do not, the girl could be further hurt by her parents’ lack of response (Sawyer et al., 2011). Consequently, this can create an environment in which girls feel that they cannot reach
out for help if they are victimized. Furthermore, research reported some additional conflicts in the way parents and girls viewed peer aggression. Bigsby (2002) found that parents and girls did not agree on whether or not social exclusion was a form of bullying. That is to say, the parents in this study did not have a full understanding of relationally aggressive behaviors such as social exclusion. In addition, he found that girls and parents disagreed on whether or not ignoring the aggressor or saying, “stop” would work (Bigsby, 2002). There was also some disagreement in the way parents and girls characterized aggressive children. For example, girls characterized relationally aggressive people as being mostly girls who are either older or younger than their victims; parents, on the other hand, described aggressors as being mostly boys who are the same age (Bigsby, 2002). In addition, the girls in Bigsby’s (2002) study agreed that they wanted the adults to be more involved which indicates that there is a difference of opinion among girls and adults in how much parents and teachers should involve themselves in incidents of peer aggression.

This difference in the way relational aggression is viewed is more prevalent than initially thought. In fact, Mishna et al., (2006) found that participants in their study had great difficulty in characterizing and identifying relationally aggressive behavior. This is a problem because the way parents make sense of and understand relational aggression will dictate whether or not they intervene or respond to this type of behavior (Sawyer et al., 2011). Smorti, Menesini, and Smith (2003) expanded on this point and reported that if parents are defining relationally aggressive behavior differently than their daughters, this difference has the potential to interfere with healthy communication at home and can prevent parents from helping their daughters in an effective and supportive manner.
Not only do girls and parents have a difference of opinion over what constitutes aggressive behavior, there is a difference in how girls and parents view the severity of these behaviors. For instance, Sawyer et al., (2011) found that although most of the parents in their study reported that relationally aggressive behaviors such as social exclusion, and gossip were considered to be bullying behavior, most of the parents viewed the physical manifestations of aggressive behavior to be most severe. Similarly, Hazler and Miller (2001) found that parents are more apt to characterize any type of physical threat or abuse as bullying, even if it is not a repeated behavior. Since the research is illustrating the finding that physical forms of aggression are being viewed as more serious, it stands to reason that relationally aggressive behaviors, while characterized as bullying, are not viewed as serious and in need of intervention. In fact, Hazler and Miller (2001) found that adults were less likely to intervene in an incident of relational aggression because the behaviors were viewed as harmful in a verbal or social manner, rather than a physical manner, which was seen as more severe.

**Teachers’ Attitudes.** Equally important as the perceptions that are held by girls and their parents are the perceptions and attitudes that teachers, and other school staff hold about relational aggression among their students. In order for girls, parents and teachers to have the same understanding, Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall (2010) reported that stakeholders in schools may need to take a step back and re-evaluate what they are currently doing to see if all the stakeholders involved are adopting a consistent approach to dealing with relational aggression. This is important because differences in the understanding of what relational aggression consists of can create inconsistencies in the approach to respond to reports of this type of aggression. In addition, if there is a difference in the way people view relational aggression over physical bullying, it could dictate whether or not a girl feels safe within the
school. For example, Lee, Buckthorpe, Craighead, and McCormack (2008) reported that a student’s sense of feeling safe and being cared for and their perceptions regarding how responsive their teachers are is indicative of the prevalence of relational aggression in that school. Further, the frequency of relational aggression has a significant impact of whether or not students view their teachers being responsive to other behavioral issues and the social cliques of the school (Lee et al., 2008). In fact, schools in which the staff members show an increased understanding and concern regarding relational aggression show a lower incidence of this behavior in their schools (Lee et al., 2008). This illustrates the need for teachers to be part of the process in working to eliminate these behaviors.

Although the study conducted by Lee et al., (2008) clearly indicates that if teachers are concerned and aware of relationally aggressive behaviors, the incidence of such behaviors would decrease, another study confirmed that school staff do not always recognize the consequences of covert abuse and will only respond to the more overt behaviors (Hazler & Miller, 2001). Hence, it is not surprising that Batsche and Knoff (2004) reported that school staff had an ineffective response to peer aggression in schools. In fact, Yoon et al., (2004) stated that teachers lack a consistent approach to address relational aggression and the effort put forth by teachers to respond to these issues is passive, at best. This passivity can result in an unawareness of the relationally aggressive behaviors that are being employed by girls in the classroom. To illustrate, Atlas and Pepler (1998) found that while relationally aggressive behaviors are pervasive in the classrooms, teachers generally are not aware that they are occurring. In addition, even when teachers received a report that a student was a victim of relational aggression, it was difficult for them to determine what happened since they did not witness the incident first hand (Mishna et
al., 2005). Further, Fekkes et al., (2005) found that even when teachers did try to stop the aggressive behaviors in their classes, at times, it made the situation worse for the victims.

In addition to the concerns raised that teachers are ineffective in identifying and responding to relational aggression, there is the concern that teacher’s attitudes may actually influence aggressive behavior and have an impact on a student’s willingness to report relational aggression to their teachers (Holt & Keyes, 2004). For example, if relational aggression is commonplace in a school, it can undermine a student’s trust in her teachers and administrators (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). This mistrust can dictate whether or not students report and seek out help in dealing with relationally aggressive behaviors. Also, Stephenson and Smith (1991) reported that in their study where they examined 12 schools, six with severe peer aggression and six with minimal peer aggression, the most significant difference between the schools was the attitude and perceptions of the teachers employed there. This study illustrates the notion that if teachers do not hold the belief that relational aggression is a problem to be dealt with in schools, this type of behavior can permeate a school community; yet, if teachers do feel relational aggression is a problem, that belief can actually decrease this type of behavior in a school. In addition, this study illustrates that there are teachers who work diligently to ensure the safety of their students from all types of aggressive behavior. For example, Maunder et al., (2010) found in their study that teachers had a more serious understanding about peer aggression than the students did in their school. This is encouraging because if teachers take aggressive behavior among peers more seriously, they are in a better position to take a proactive role in prevention and intervention work (Maunder et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, there are teachers who hold the same attitudes and perceptions that some parents do when it comes to relational aggression. Mishna et al., (2005) found that teachers were
more likely to respond to physical acts of aggression, rather than the covert behaviors that relational aggression is characteristic of because they had the belief that this type of aggression is more serious. Moreover, Mishna (2004) reported that teachers in her study described peer aggression as a normal part of growing up and that victims need to learn how to stand up for themselves. Consequently, some teachers might struggle with whether or not students were misperceiving social situations as aggressive and harmful when it was not (Mishna et al., 2005). Additionally, some teachers may acknowledge that a student is upset and that the student perceives herself as being victimized but not view the incident as being severe (Mishna et al., 2005). Moreover, teachers may find it a challenge to determine what is actually happening between students and who the cause of the conflict is. Mishna (2004) found that some teachers had the attitude that some students were invested in being victims and that it was difficult to determine if the perceived victim was actually the one who caused the aggressive behavior to occur.

In addition to the challenges facing teachers in their attitudes regarding relational aggression, this type of behavior is especially difficult for teachers to identify (Mishna et al., 2005). Further, even if teachers can identify that relational aggression is a problem, they reported being ill equipped to handle these issues (Mishna, 2004). For example, Mishna et al., (2005) reported that not only did teachers not know how to intervene; often they did not know if they should intervene. Typically, when teachers and school counselors do feel that intervention is necessary, they want to help students through their peer relationship issues with peer mediation. However, teachers and counselors need to be reminded that when dealing with relational aggression there is a power imbalance, which often makes this type of intervention inappropriate (Bauman et al., 2008).
It is important to understand that the role of school staff in combatting relational aggression should not be underestimated. In fact, Eslea and Smith (2000) reported that the most significant finding in research examining relational aggression and bullying is that when school staff take the issue seriously and respond appropriately, the incidence of peer aggression can be substantially decreased. Equally important is the finding that teachers who were trained how to respond to relational aggression were less likely to ignore a student’s victimization and were more likely to provide an effective response to the incident (Bauman et al., 2008). Thus, it is vital that school staff be properly trained in identifying and responding to relational aggression.

**Phoebe Prince Incident.** As the research has shown, having a shared understanding between parents and teachers of the nuances of relational aggression is vital. Hargrove (2010) took this point further and stated that teachers and parents need to develop the skills needed to stop peer aggression in schools to avoid tragedies like what happened to Phoebe Prince in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Additionally, school counselors and teachers need to know how to interpret relationally aggressive behaviors in order to have an effective response and help victims of such behaviors (Casey-Cannon, Howard, & Gowen, 2001). Further, Bauman et al., (2008) addressed the need for teachers and school counselors to have a shared understanding of this type of aggression. Due to the training that school counselors participate in, they may have a better understanding of this type of peer aggression than teachers do (Bauman et al., 2008). However, in the South Hadley case, Phoebe’s mother had visited the school several times to complain about her daughter’s victimization. Phoebe’s mother reported that there was a culture in the school, such that kids engage in these types of behaviors and teachers look the other way when students are victimized (Hargrove, 2010). Further, Phoebe’s mother reported that the school staff categorized Phoebe’s treatment by her peers as normal teasing among peers (Hargrove,
2010). In this case, the parent was able to identify her daughter’s victimization but the school staff was not. Even though there were many requests made by Phoebe’s mother asking the school staff to help her daughter, no one intervened on Phoebe’s behalf despite the fact that there are laws to mandate that teachers report abuse (Hargrove, 2010). According to witnesses, Phoebe was harassed on a daily basis in the school cafeteria and there were even reports of girls interrupting classes by peeking their heads in the classroom and calling Phoebe names (Norman & Connolly, 2011). This type of behavior was visible to teachers but they still held the view that this was normal teasing by girls (Hargrove, 2010). The day Phoebe died, she was seen crying in the nurse’s office at school; later that afternoon, she took her own life (Farbish, 2011). This illustrates the need for school nurses and health centers to be involved in prevention efforts as well. In fact, Nishina et al., (2005) reported that school nurses may have students come to them with health issues that are masking social emotional issues and this should be assessed. In essence, the literature makes the case for all school staff: educators, aides, administrators, nurses, cafeteria workers and custodians, to hold similar attitudes and be trained how to respond to relational aggression in schools.

**Theme Four: Cyberbullying**

Recently, with the technology boom, more students than ever have access to some type of technology and with that, comes access to social networking sites. With the help of phones, laptops, tablets and other electronic devices, girls can send messages to their peers at any time of the day or night. Consequently, peer aggression can also be exhibited through these technological resources. Because of this, there has been a new type of peer aggression that has been highlighted in the media, in schools and communities. This type of peer aggression, that employs technology as a tool, is called cyberbullying.
Cyberbullying has become a recent phenomenon due to the advancement in technology (Konig, Gollwitzer, & Steffgen, 2010). This has become more of an issue because youths who are using technology and the Internet have created a world for themselves that is not always monitored by adults (Mason, 2008). With the use of technology comes a responsibility that many youths may not be ready for. To illustrate, Beale and Hall (2007) reported that cyberbullying appears to become more rampant through the elementary years and peaks with middle school students. Further, Kowalski and Limber (2007) found in their study that electronic bullying was a problem in middle school. In fact, the authors stated that it is naïve to think that students are not engaging in cyberbullying behaviors (Beale & Hall, 2007). Moreover, they believe that it is not important to assess whether it is happening, they argue that school leaders need to assess how pervasive the problem is so they can address specific aspects of the problem (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Interestingly, it appears that girls are engaging in cyberbullying behaviors more so than boys (Beale & Hall, 2007). In fact, Kowalski and Limber (2007) examined electronic bullying among middle school students and found that girls had a higher incidence of being both the bully and the victim. Since girls are reportedly more likely to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors, that is, the indirect, covert type of bullying, it stands to reason that they would be more likely to engage in a behavior in which they can harass someone anonymously.

Furthermore, Cantanzaro (2011) postulated that the onset of social networking sites has allowed girls to harass their peers with ease through cell phones. In previous years, girls would have to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors in person, in other words, if girls wanted to call another girl a nasty name, they had to do it face to face. In the cyberbullying age, that is no longer necessary. Additionally, if girls were being harassed they could switch schools or move
away and have the torment end. That is not the case anymore; due to the World Wide Web, the gossip and name-calling follows them (Cantanzaro, 2011). In fact, this was the case with Amanda Todd. Amanda switched schools several times to escape the daily torment and cyberbullying she was experiencing. Unfortunately, the rumors followed her to each new school with a simple Internet search. Clearly, this type of peer aggression presents unique challenges to girls, parents and teachers.

After a review of the literature on cyberbullying, information gleaned from the studies highlighted four categories. Most notably in the literature were the challenges cyberbullying presents, the issue of cyberbullying as retaliation among youths, reporting cyberbullying and finally, implications and consequences. These categories are discussed in depth below.

**Challenges.** Cyberbullying has presented a unique set of challenges for girls, parents and educators. The literature addressed many of the dilemmas that stakeholders face; however, the challenges that seem to be woven through the studies can be grouped into three subcategories: anonymity of the aggressor, the sense that cyberbullying is most often occurring out of school and the sense that there is no reprieve for the victims. Each of these subcategories is discussed below.

**Anonymity of the aggressor.** There are certain aspects of cyberbullying that make it a difficult type of peer aggression to track and monitor. Consequently, girls who are victimized may not be able to identify the person who is sending them harassing messages (Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010). Although the use of text messages, Facebook messages, Instagram posts, and tweets require that the sender have an account with user names and/or cell phone numbers that are easily identified, there are social media sites that youths visit that are completely anonymous. Because of this, it is easier for perpetrators of this type of aggression to target their
victims without any repercussions. Furthermore, Froese-Germain (2008) reported that the anonymity that is afforded the aggressor in cyberbullying incidents makes it nearly impossible to find the identity of the aggressor. In addition, one can create a fake account on a site in which a user name is necessary, and still remain anonymous to their victims (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). This aspect of cyberbullying may make this type of aggression more appealing to girls who are hesitant to say something to another girl face to face (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). These fake accounts, couples with the fact that girls may be accepting “friend” or “follow” requests from people that they have never met, makes this type of aggressive behavior effortless for the perpetrators.

As a result of the ease with which girls can be aggressive towards each other because of the anonymity cyberbullying provides, it can be difficult to determine how to effectively respond to these aggressive behaviors. Girls may go to school and wonder if the aggressor is sitting next to them in class; this may cause girls to not engage in school because they are hyper-focused on the harassment. In addition, parents may feel helpless in how to assist their daughters and respond appropriately to their needs because they do not know the identity of the perpetrator. Finally, educators may struggle to keep girls feeling safe in school when it is not clear if the perpetrator is a student or not. In fact, the anonymity afforded to the perpetrator through cyberbullying is one of the most problematic issues of this type of aggression (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

**Cyberbullying outside of school.** Because technology is so readily available to youths, it is easy for a perpetrator of cyberbullying to continue to harass someone outside of school. This is a different experience for girls when years ago, the end of the school day would signal an end to peer aggression for that day so long as the victim did not see the perpetrator outside of school.
Unfortunately, this is not the case anymore. In fact, in a study conducted by Agatston, Kowalski and Limber (2007), students reported that the majority of the cyberbullying incidents they experienced happened outside of the school day. However, the same students reported cyberbullying via text messages occurs during the school day. Additionally, Holfeld and Grabe (2012) found in their study that incidents of cyberbullying seldom occur on school property, during the school day. In this same study, it was reported that cyberbullying is more apt to be happening from students’ homes (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). To illustrate, in a study conducted with secondary school students, which includes students in middle school, the perception is that cyberbullying happens most out of school, rather than in school (Smith et al., 2008). In other words, more and more students are being victimized outside of the school day.

Because girls can be victimized by aggressive behavior anywhere, at any time, there is a heightened awareness of this type of aggression on the part of the victim. For example, Kowalski and Limber (2007) report that this causes students to feel more vulnerable to peer aggression. In turn, this vulnerability can have an impact on a girl’s anxiety levels and school performance. In fact, Froese-Germain (2008) cautioned against thinking that just because cyberbullying takes place most often outside of school, it does not significantly affect a student in school. Indeed, students who are being cyberbullied have difficulty focusing on their schoolwork, which can, in turn, affect their grades.

**No reprieve.** Before the technology age, when girls were not in the physical proximity of the peers who were harassing them, there was some respite from all the taunting. In the age of technology, that safety from aggressive peers is difficult to find. In fact, the potential for youths to be victimized by their aggressive peers has increased because of the number of cell phones, laptops and other technological devices of which youths own (Smith et al., 2008). Further, most
young people have cell phones that can be used to send threatening text messages and can also be used to access social networking sites. Because of the nature of how these sites work, harassing messages on a social networking site is not only seen by the intended victim, it is also seen by a much larger audience (Perrin et al., 2010). In other words, any comment or picture that is posted where the intended victim is identified, either by name or by putting the comment or picture directly on their wall, is seen by the intended victim and all the people in their network (Perrin, 2010). In addition, depending on the privacy settings employed by the aggressor and victim, many others outside of their network will see this information as well. This makes it difficult for girls to escape the pain and humiliation this type of harassment can cause.

Social networking sites are not the only reason why there is no reprieve from cyberbullying. When girls have access to technology, they can send a message to someone at any time. In other words, young people can receive threatening messages within the comfort and safety of their own home. Consequently, there is no break for girls who are being victimized by their peers (Mason, 2008). Equally disturbing is that messages can be sent at any time to a very large audience in a matter of seconds (Froese-Germain, 2008). These messages can live in the cyber world and can be found with a quick Internet search. As a result, girls can never escape the taunting that they are being exposed to. For example, pictures can be taken in school and sent out to every contact listed in a cell phone, then, those who receive the picture can send it out to all their contacts. This can be done in a matter of minutes. Thus, girls are living with the knowledge that what used to be a private humiliation now has hundreds of witnesses. This can be very challenging for not only the girls involved, but their parents and teachers as well.

**Cyberbullying as Revenge.** While there are not an abundance of studies addressing cyberbullying as retaliation, this aspect of cyberbullying provides an interesting reason as to why
this behavior may be occurring. When someone is a victim of relational aggression, the face-to-face harassment may have an impact on whether or not the victim will assert herself, fight back or retaliate in some way. Given the nature of how cyberbullying occurs, this may be an attractive method for girls to empower themselves to fight back. Therefore, cyberbullying can be seen as a way to seek justice for being wronged by another party. In fact, this type of aggressive behavior allows girls to say what they would not have the courage to say to someone directly (Konig et al., 2010).

In addition, cyberbullying as revenge affords girls the opportunity to fight back and do it anonymously (Konig et al., 2010). In the event that a girl’s identity remains hidden, this can help girls feel empowered to assert themselves without running the risk of retaliation. Despite the risk of having their identity revealed at some point, girls are safe for the time being and this feeling of safety allows them to say what they may not have the courage to say face-to-face (Konig et al., 2010).

Finally, cyberbullying can help girls assert themselves as someone who will not tolerate being picked on (Konig et al., 2010). For example, girls who punish their perpetrators may be sending a message that they will fight back if someone exhibits this type of behavior toward them (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). If a girl fights back and asserts herself, she may be less likely to be victimized in the future. While it may be difficult to do that in a face-to-face setting, cyberbullying affords girls a safe opportunity to defend themselves.

**Reporting Cyberbullying.** In order to combat any type of aggressive behavior among girls, parents and educators need to be aware that this behavior is taking place. Because cyberbullying takes place in a virtual world, a world in which parents and educators are usually not a part of, adults must rely on the girls themselves to make their victimization known to others.
(O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This, however, can be problematic because girls may not report incidents of cyberbullying. In fact, Mason (2008) found that even in families where the parents try to monitor their daughter’s online activity, girls are hesitant to report being victimized by cyberbullying. Consequently, cyberbullying incidents may go unnoticed and may not be responded to. This can lead to girls trying to cope with this type of victimization on their own.

In contrast, Holfeld and Grabe (2012) found that girls are, in fact, reporting this type of victimization but they are less likely to report it to school staff. Similarly, Agatston et al., (2007) found that girls are more likely to disclose being victimized to a parent than to someone at school, especially if the harassment involved a threat. As a result, educators have to look beyond themselves in order to assist girls in dealing with being victimized. For this reason, educators are cautioned to develop programs to address cyberbullying that do not rely solely on the report of the victim (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Thus, professional development opportunities should be explored to be sure that educators are properly trained and prepared to address this issue (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012).

While it is important that girls are likely to report their victimization to a parent, it is equally important to examine why girls may not seek help from school staff. Presumably, classmates are perpetrating some of the cyberbullying incidents that girls experience. Given this, it would stand to reason that it would be beneficial for girls to report these incidents to their teachers or counselors. However, Agatston et al., (2007) found in their study examining students’ perceptions on cyberbullying that students do not believe that school staff can help them if they were to experience cyberbullying. Equally concerning is O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson’s (2011) finding that school social workers are not sure how to respond to reports of cyberbullying. If social workers, who receive specialized training in order to assist people in
dealing with conflict, are unsure how to respond, it makes sense that teachers are also feeling inadequately prepared to deal with the issue of cyberbullying. In addition, in O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson’s (2011) study, only 20% of the social workers interviewed felt that their school’s policy on cyberbullying was sufficient and was capable of curbing cyberbullying in their school. Consequently, this issue is not being responded to in an effective manner.

**Implications/Consequences.** The age of technology has brought new challenges to both parents and educators when dealing with the online safety of young people. For example, girls may disclose personal information about themselves that leave them vulnerable to online harassment. Indeed, the nature of social networking sites is that one must provide at least their name and birthdate; members are also encouraged to post photographs of themselves (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). In addition, girls have the option of making their profile public or private which can also leave them vulnerable to online harassment. Moreover, girls may accept requests from people who wish to be part of their social network that they have never met.

These factors come together to create the perfect storm of opportunity for cyberbullies. While Katzer et al., (2009) reported that being a member of a social networking site does not mean that a girl will be harassed; cyberbullying is becoming increasingly more common and can cause anxiety and depression in its victims. In fact, Perren et al., (2010) stated that the consequences of cyberbullying are similar to the consequences of relational aggression and physical bullying. Because of this, cyberbullying may have a negative impact on girls’ academic performance. Consequently, there are important implications for schools in developing prevention and intervention programs for students (Perren et al., 2010).

**Chapter III: Methodology**
The researcher proposed a qualitative study that utilized focus groups to collect data. Merriam (2002) described qualitative researchers as wanting to understand their participants’ reality and how they interpret the issue to be studied. This type of research lent itself to the research questions that are proposed:

1. What is the experience of middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized by relational aggression and how have these girls responded?

2. What are the other stakeholders’ (parents, teachers, school administrators) perspectives on the issues and challenges confronted by middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized and in what ways have these adults responded?

3. What are the girls’ experiences of the stakeholders’ responses to their perceived victimization?

Generally, the qualitative researcher aims to understand the meaning that participants give to their experiences (Merriam, 2002; Creswell, 2007, 2009). A qualitative study allowed the researcher to explore participants’ perceptions, meanings and experiences of relational aggression. In this type of research, the researcher was used as the tool to collect data, as opposed to using surveys or questionnaires (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) stated that because qualitative researchers seek to understand, the human instrument is more beneficial because it can be responsive in a timely manner and can also illuminate verbal communication with observations of nonverbal communication. As such, the researcher facilitated focus groups in order to enhance the data collection process with rich data from both verbal and nonverbal communications. In fact, the researcher valued observations of participants’ nonverbal communication; as a clinical social worker, the researcher is trained to observe nonverbal communication in individuals such as body language, facial expressions and eye contact.
Observing nonverbal communications during the focus groups assisted the researcher in understanding participant’s views regarding relational aggression.

**Research Design**

The researcher conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study. The crux of qualitative research is that the researcher is seeking an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of a specific phenomenon. The qualitative researcher wants to understand how participants interpret the world around them. Gaining insight into how people understand their world is considered an interpretive qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002). In this instance, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon of relational aggression in middle school girls. Thus, it was useful to utilize an interpretive qualitative approach to explore the understanding and perceptions of girls, their parents and school staff in order to get a comprehensive view of relational aggression and the impact it had on the stakeholders involved. It was vital to the researcher’s understanding of relational aggression to understand if there were differing perspectives between the girls, their parents and school staff. If girls, parents and school staff have a different understanding of whether or not relational aggression is a problem, or how relational aggression should be responded to, this could potentially be an area of concern in combatting the issue of relational aggression in schools.

According to Merriam (2002), there are several characteristics of a basic interpretive qualitative study. In this type of study, the researcher pursued an understanding of how participants make meaning of the phenomenon being studied. Researchers want to understand how the phenomenon to be studied affects the participants in their daily lives. In a basic interpretive qualitative study, the primary instrument employed to collect data is the researcher. Because the researcher pursued the meaning participants give to their experiences, nonverbal
communications were important and could not be obtained through a survey. For example, facial expressions and body language added to the participants’ views and could only be observed. Additionally, facial expressions and body language have the potential to highlight a participant’s discomfort and this was important in ensuring participant’s safety. It was also important to observe whether body language and facial expressions mirror what the participant was reporting. For example, did a participant have a flat or blunted affect while reporting an experience? Did a participant appear happy while discussing experiences? This provided more details to the data collected by helping to illuminate how participants were feeling.

Further, in the basic interpretive qualitative study, the researcher used an inductive strategy to analyze data. Inductive analysis allowed the researcher to develop themes in the data that had the potential to become substantive theory. Typically, the data that is collected in a qualitative study comes from interviews and/or focus groups. The outcome of this type of study is largely descriptive in nature. Thus, an interpretive qualitative study allowed the researcher to gain richly descriptive data from participants through their verbal and nonverbal communication.

The researcher aimed to use richly descriptive data to determine the meaning that participant’s hold regarding relational aggression. According to Creswell, (2007, 2009), qualitative research keeps a focus on the meaning the participants give to a specific problem or issue. This type of research also lent itself to the proposed theoretical framework. As reported previously, according to the social ecological framework, peer aggression occurs within the relationship of the aggressor and victim and can permeate throughout the entire community. (Barboza et al., 2009). There are relationships between girls and school staff, girls and their parents, and parents and school staff. In order to understand these relationships and to understand how stakeholders perceive relational aggression, the researcher allowed participants
to discuss their experiences and perceptions without the constraints of close-ended questions such as those employed in survey research which only provide a numeric depiction of participants’ attitudes and perceptions (Creswell, 2009). Conversely, open ended questions like the ones employed in the qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher and participants to explore, in depth, the issue of relational aggression and discover how the participants’ relationship with a perceived aggressor affected their perception of an incident (Creswell, 2007).

**Research Tradition**

A general inductive approach was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. Merriam (2002) described qualitative research as being a largely inductive process. Thomas, (2006), identified an inductive method to analyzing data as the general inductive approach, or GIA. He defined the general inductive approach as an orderly procedure that follows a step-by-step approach to analyzing qualitative data in which the objectives of the evaluation guide the analysis. This approach to analyzing data is commonly used in social science research (Thomas, 2006). The general inductive approach allowed the researcher to generate findings based on themes that emerge in the raw data that may not be apparent with a more structured methodology (Thomas, 2006).

Inductive analysis is described by Creswell (2007, 2009) as a process by which the researcher reads through the data in order to find common themes and patterns. These themes are then grouped by similar themes and reviewed repeatedly until a smaller group of themes can be identified. This process also required the researcher to work with participants of the study to be sure themes that are developed from abstract information are accurate. This involved member checking, to review the data and ensure accuracy of the statements recorded. Member checking
is the process of taking the collected data, the interpretations and analyses the researcher has employed and the conclusions drawn based on those analyses and interpretations, back to the participants to determine the credibility of the participants’ views (Creswell, 2007).

In an inductive analysis of qualitative data, the themes are not predetermined, but are developed through the analysis of the data (Hatch, 2002). The final analysis was reached through careful dissection of the data collected and it married similarities to make common themes so the data was meaningful. Hatch (2002), posited that the advantage of doing an inductive analysis is that it is a structured approach to analyzing data. There were specific steps to follow and this type of analysis assisted the researcher in finding meaning within data that was complex. The complex data was reviewed repeatedly until the researcher identified common themes within the data. This process was repeated until the researcher classified the data into three to eight categories (Thomas, 2006).

**Participants**

In a qualitative study, focus groups generally include five to eight participants in each group (Robinson, 1999). For the purpose of this study, three focus groups, with 19 participants in all, was conducted. A snowball sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants into the study. This sampling strategy entailed having people identify other individuals who have had experience with relational aggression. Creswell (2007) stated that a snowball sample is useful in a qualitative study as it allows the researcher to identify more participants with some knowledge of the topic to be studied that may not otherwise be possible. In this study, it was beneficial to have participants who have had some experience with relational aggression in order to fully inform the study. This qualitative study employed three different focus groups. One group consisted of girls who believe that they have been victims of relational aggression. The second
group consisted of parents of the girls who participated in the focus group. The third group consisted of middle school staff, which included teachers, counselors and teacher’s aides.

Plummer-D’Amato (2008) stated that participants who are chosen for a study should have some experience with or be interested in the phenomenon that is being studied. This could provide some homogeneity to the focus groups in the current study. However, Kitzinger (1994) stated that having diversity in a focus group is not something that should be avoided. Such diversity in a focus group can produce differing opinions on the topic and participants would need to clarify and explain their perspectives. This would help the researcher gain insight into the participants’ personal lives and assist in the understanding of why participants have the views that they do and in the process, collect rich data. Kitzinger (1994) further posited that diversity and the clarification of views can ensure that participants are not just trying to provide a right answer to the questions asked. It could be more difficult for participants to explain themselves and clarify what they are saying if they are not discussing their own views on the topic.

**Recruitment and Access**

Participants were recruited via a snowball sample through social media/email and in person by the researcher. Girls who were recruited must have believed that they had been the victims of relational aggression. The focus groups took place in a private room at a public library that was centrally located for the participants. Snacks and drinks were provided to focus group participants as an incentive and to help increase their comfort level.

As a clinical social worker, the researcher was aware that facilitating focus groups with girls who have perceived themselves as victims of relational aggression could have posed an ethical dilemma. For example, the literature review has highlighted the emotional effects that relational aggression may have on girls. As such, the researcher needed to be cognizant of the
participants’ emotional states as we progressed through the interview process. This was also important in facilitating the focus groups with the parents. Relational aggression and bullying can be a highly charged emotional issue for some people so the researcher needed to be mindful of the possibility that participants may have had strong feelings about the issue and needed to be cognizant of how participants were responding to the discussion. Consequently, the researcher had a licensed counselor sit in on the girls’ focus group. In addition, counseling resources such as phone numbers for counseling agencies and crisis intervention hotlines were provided to the parents of the girls should they want to pursue that type of support.

Another ethical consideration was the need for the researcher to ensure the comfort of all participants. In other words, the researcher ensured that there is no history of conflict between the girls who are participating in the focus groups. The researcher investigated this by determining the extent to which any relationships exist between the girls and asking directed questions about the nature of those relationships prior to convening the focus group. The researcher also needed to ensure that the parents do not have any history of conflict with one another in order to increase their comfort level in the focus groups.

Despite the ethical considerations the researcher needed to be aware of, there was minimal risk to the participants of the focus groups. One of the focus groups consisted of a special population, girls under the age of 18 years old. Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board was consulted for approval of the study. Informed consent was requested from the parents of the girls, as well as the girls themselves. In addition, informed consent was requested from the school staff that will be participating. Further, the participants’ identities were kept confidential. Additionally, participants were instructed not to share what is discussed in the
focus groups outside of the group experience. Finally, names were changed to protect the identity of the participants.

Institutional Review Board applications were completed and submitted to Northeastern University before any focus groups were facilitated. Once approval for the study was received, participants were recruited and focus groups were scheduled.

**Data Collection**

For the purpose of this study, focus groups were utilized to examine relational aggression. The use of focus groups required the researcher to facilitate discussions, which allowed participants to interact with each other and provided rich data regarding the topic of relational aggression (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). This method of collecting data has grown in recent years (Wilson, 1997). Wilson (1997) described focus groups as a forum in which the researcher can delve into the perceptions and feelings that participants hold. Additionally, a focus group can employ group interactions to enhance the data that is being collected (Wilson, 1997). Further, Morgan (1996) described focus groups as a tool to provide marginalized groups an opportunity to be heard. In this forum, the girls had a voice in that they were able to discuss their experiences and perceptions about relational aggression, how it was responded to, and by whom. Focus groups also allowed participants to ask questions of one another, make comments and provide explanations as to their beliefs regarding the topic of discussion (Morgan, 1996). Massey (2011) added to this description of focus groups and stated that group dynamics provide a forum for the facilitator to encourage insightful discussions among focus group participants. In the present study, participants shared their experiences, which enabled other participants to remember part of their story that they may not have otherwise reported (Massey, 2011). Massey (2011) stated that this is a strength of the focus group model over individual interviews.
The focus groups the researcher conducted consisted of a 60-90 minute discussion, followed by a 10-15 minute summation by the researcher of what was discussed. Wilson (1997) stated that focus groups are most effective when staying within the one to two hour time limits. There was also time for participants to clarify what the researcher has summarized to be sure the participants’ views are accurately reported. The focus groups were recorded through a portable recording device and the researcher took written notes as well. In addition, participants’ initials were used in the notes in order to differentiate between participants’ comments. Using initials assisted the researcher in keeping the identity of the participants confidential. Once the data was ready to be transcribed, each participant’s initials were then substituted with a pseudonym, which was included on the transcribed version of the written notes. Lastly, the issue of confidentiality was explained to the participants. Seidman (2006) clarified the difference between keeping confidentiality versus keeping the confidentiality of participants. Because the purpose of the study was to inform stakeholders about what would be beneficial in developing anti-bullying programs, confidentiality of the material discussed cannot be maintained; the participants’ stories will need to be shared. However, confidentiality of participants will be maintained, as their names were not used in any portion of the study.

In addition to the concerns stated above, because the topic of study involved safety issues, there was a possibility that confidentiality of participants was compromised, as this researcher is a mandated reporter. Seidman (2006) discussed two limits to confidentiality: the subpoena and mandated reporter requirements. While this researcher did not anticipate any subpoenas being served on her, there was a real concern regarding mandated reporter requirements. All participants were informed that the researcher is a mandated reporter and were advised that if there was any disclosure about a child being abused or neglected, this
researcher would need to report the information to the Department of Children and Family Services. In addition, if a participant disclosed wanting to hurt himself or herself or wants to hurt someone else, proper authorities such as the local crisis team or law enforcement would have been contacted. No such report needed to be filed.

**Data Storage**

Data that was collected via the portable recorder was kept in a locked desk until the data was transcribed. Written notes that the researcher took were kept in the locked desk as well, until the researcher could transcribe them onto a password-protected computer. Once the recordings were transcribed, they were also kept on a password-protected computer. This computer was then kept locked in an office in the researcher’s home. Following the completion of the study and acceptance by the thesis committee, the written notes were shredded and the tapes of the focus groups were destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher manually transcribed the data that was collected during the focus groups. It was then analyzed using the general inductive approach (GIA) to analyzing research. Thomas (2006) identified procedures used in the inductive analysis of data. The researcher first prepared the data to be read. Thomas (2006) suggested preparing the data could include changing the font so it is easier to read. Once the data were transcribed, this researcher ensured adequate spacing in the transcription so notes could be taken in order to begin to identify themes. The researcher read the data repeatedly until the content of the data was familiar. The researcher then created categories based on what was found in the data. These categories began as specific categories and as the researcher continued to review the data, the categories were merged and became more
generalized. The researcher continued to review the data, and refined the categories until data that did not fit into any of the categories discovered was identified.

Creswell (2009) posited that the coding of qualitative data involves organizing the data into chunks of information. Organization of the data enabled this researcher to develop themes within the data. Thomas (2006) described the coding process that is used in an inductive analysis as the defining of themes. The initial reading of the data in the present study resulted in many pages of text. As the researcher proceeded through the above procedures, the pages of text were put into a large group of categories. The data was continuously re-read and these categories were refined into broader categories until all the data was classified into three to eight categories (Thomas, 2006).

Hatch (2004) and Thomas (2006) break down an inductive analysis into concrete steps. This researcher followed this procedure in order to analyze the data. To begin, the data was prepared for analysis. The transcriptions were printed in larger font and were double spaced so the researcher could highlight, underline and make notations on the transcriptions. In addition, multiple copies were printed as a backup. The researcher then read the transcriptions closely and made notes along the margins. Further, the transcriptions were read several times to ensure the researcher was familiar with the content and could begin to see themes develop in the data. Once the researcher felt comfortable with the data, the data was then categorized into different themes. Thomas (2006) identified two types of categories: upper level categories or themes usually derive from the research questions being investigated; lower level categories are typically gathered from the multiple readings of the data. This process is also called in vivo coding (Thomas, 2006). In an inductive analysis, the categories come directly from actual statements the participants make (Thomas, 2006). The process of developing themes afforded this
researcher the opportunity to have dozens of themes from the initial analysis. From there, the researcher attempted to minimize redundancy and overlapping in the themes by eliminating data that did not fit into any of the categories. Thomas (2006), for example, stated that it is not uncommon to have 50% of the data not fit into any themes. Finally, the researcher continued to “revise and refine” the categories until only the most important themes remained (Thomas, 2006, p. 242). Categories with similar meanings were combined in order to reduce the number of themes in which the data was organized.

**Trustworthiness**

Because the topic to be studied had the potential to have an impact on the anti-bullying program the researcher’s school district is using, the researcher took care in ensuring the proposed study was trustworthy. Trustworthiness of a study depends on whether or not the results of a study are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order for the findings to have some meaning, the researcher needed to ensure that the study was conducted in such a way that the results are trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified issues to consider when determining trustworthiness of a study. Clarifying questions were asked as participants told their stories in order to ensure accuracy in the statements made to increase trustworthiness of the results. The researcher facilitated the focus groups in such a way that the participants stayed on topic and increased the applicability of the findings of this study, to another study with similar participants. To ensure neutrality, the researcher asked open-ended questions which allowed the participants to speak freely about their views of the phenomenon that was studied.

Measures were taken to ensure reliability and validity of the data. Creswell (2009) posited qualitative validity means the researcher has taken steps to check for accuracy of the data collected. He further stated that qualitative reliability requires the researcher to have a
consistent approach to conducting research (Creswell, 2009). Thus, the three focus groups were facilitated in similar fashions in order to have consistency in the research.

Moreover, Creswell (2009) suggested that in order to increase the reliability and validity of the study, the researcher should triangulate the data, use member checking and use rich, thick descriptions (p. 191) when reporting the findings. As a result, the researcher checked transcripts of the data for mistakes in the transcription process. The researcher also reviewed and clarified key points with the participants at the end of the focus groups in order to give participants the opportunity to clarify any thoughts or views that were not clear. Following the transcription of the data, participants were invited to read the transcripts to be sure their voices were accurately documented.

In addition to concerns regarding reliability and validity, limitations of the study were considered. For example, a limitation of the snowball method of sampling for this study was that some of the participants had similar views or experiences based on their geographical proximity and the fact that some participants were referred to the researcher by other participants. Further, given the geographical limitations of the study, there were not significant cultural differences in the school communities of the participants. This provided the researcher with similar views of the phenomenon to be studied. Use of a small number of participants may also be seen as a limitation since the results were not necessarily generalizable to a larger population. However, a small population allowed the researcher to ask more in depth clarifying questions in order to get rich details rather than superficial reports.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter presents the results that emerged from the data analysis of the present study. The chapter begins with a review of the study context as well as a presentation of each focus
group participant’s profile. Then, a comprehensive analysis of the data will be presented according to common themes. First, themes that emerged common across all of the focus groups will be presented. This will then be followed by emergent themes specific to each of the three focus groups. Finally, the research questions will be presented with relevant themes. The research questions by which the study was guided are presented below.

1. What is the perception of the experience that middle school girls’ who have been victimized by relational aggression hold and in what ways have they responded?

2. What are the other stakeholders’ (parents, teachers, school administrators) perspectives on the issues and challenges confronted by middle school girls’ who perceive they have been victimized and in what ways have they responded?

3. What are the girls’ experiences of the stakeholders’ responses to their perceived victimization?

As noted above, results are first presented according to common themes found among the three focus groups. Relevant examples of the articulated data will be presented in support of each of the themes presented. In other words, participant responses to the questions asked and any specific points of discussion will be presented. Participants’ responses will be presented verbatim; using participant’s exact phrasing allows readers more insight into the participant’s world. In addition to articulated data, attributional data will also be reported, illustrating the development of the conversations between the participants and the group dynamics among them (Massey, 2011). In other words, attributional data refers to any further discussion not directed towards a scripted question as well as dynamics of the interaction among and between focus group members including gestures and any emotional reactions. These unscripted conversations, as well as the ways in which group members related to one another is important to the context of this study. To conclude this chapter, the research questions will be specifically addressed.
Study Context

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate perceptions of relational aggression among middle school girls. The researcher examined the experiences and perceptions of middle school girls who believe they have been victims of relational aggression and their parents’ experiences of their daughter’s perceived victimization. Also examined were parents’ experiences of their daughter’s perceived victimization, their perceptions of the challenges facing their daughters and their perceptions of how the school staff respond to this behavior. In addition, the researcher examined the perceptions that middle school educators hold regarding relational aggression. Finally, the researcher examined the extent to which there is consistency and a shared understanding among the stakeholders as to how relational aggression should be responded and where that responsibility lies. Three 90-minute focus groups were conducted with a total of 20 participants.

Participant Profiles

Girls’ Focus Group. A total of seven girls in grades 6-8 who perceived that they had been victims of relational aggression participated in the girls’ focus group. For the purpose of differentiating participants’ voices each girl chose a pseudonym. Their individual profiles are as follows.

“Jordan” is an 8th grade student who considers herself to be a part of the “popular” crowd and has many friends. She enjoys many extra-curricular activities in and out of school.

“Emily” is an 8th grade student who describes herself as an athlete who does not belong to a specific group and is generally friendly with everyone.

“Kandice” is an 8th grade student who describes herself as a loner that does not belong to any social or extra-curricular groups in school and does not have many friends.
“Kourtney” is a 7th grade student who describes herself as having one best friend but not many other friends. She is not involved in any activities.

“Brittney” is a 7th grade student who reports having many best friends but not having a lot of face-to-face contact with them outside of school. She is an athlete that participates in a non-school sponsored sport that occurs for the majority of the school year so she does not participate in school-sponsored activities.

“Amber” is a 6th grade student who reports being friends with many people but not having a best friend. She participates in several activities in and out of school.

“Grace” is 6th grade student who describes herself as having a close-knit group of friends. She participates in extra-curricular activities that are of a social nature.

**Parents’ Focus Group.** The parent focus group consisted of six mothers and one father whose daughters participated in the girls’ focus group. Parents were assigned a pseudonym and their profiles are discussed below.

“Holly” is the mother of an 8th grade girl. She is a therapist who works with children and also has one son at home. She remembers what it is like to be bullied and worries about her daughter.

“Maria” is the mother of an 8th grade girl. She is a curriculum coordinator at a high school. She has one child.

“Mike” is the father of an 8th grade girl. He is a postal worker who also has two sons at home. He describes his wife as the person who “takes care of that stuff” (any school issues with the children).

“Trish” is the mother of a 7th grade girl. She is self-employed and has two other daughters at home. She describes herself as an advocate for her daughter.
“Nicole” is the mother of a 7th grade girl. She is a therapist who works with kids who have trauma histories. She has one other daughter at home and describes herself as a person who is responsive, not reactive.

“Kristen” is the mother of a 6th grade girl. She has another daughter and one son at home. She is a teacher who remembers being bullied as a child because her family did not have a lot of money and she does not want her daughter to have to experience that.

“Jessica” is the mother of a 6th grade girl. She is a nurse and reports that she sees the physical consequences of bullying in her patients. She also has one son at home.

**Educators’ Focus Group.** Six educators participated in the educators’ focus group. Despite the call for a variety of school personnel to participate in this study, there were no administrators who volunteered. Educators were also assigned a pseudonym. Their individual profiles are described below.

“Anne” is a middle school special education teacher. She has worked in the same school throughout her career and has worked in 6th, 7th and 8th grade. She is currently working in a large urban middle school.

“Hannah” is a middle school guidance counselor. She has worked in 2 different middle schools. Currently she works in a large urban middle school. Previously, she worked in an urban middle school in the southeast.

“Laurie” is a middle school special education teacher. She previously worked as a teacher’s assistant in the same school. She works in a large urban school that has a 90% free and reduced lunch rate. She works across grades in 6th – 8th grade.

“Bonnie” is a middle school special education teacher. Currently, she is working in a small, suburban district in the 6th grade. She has worked in several different middle schools,
both in this geographical area and in the southeast. She has spent her entire career as a middle school educator.

“Sarah” is a 6th grade regular education teacher. She has been teaching for seven years and has been in the same position in a small suburban school for her entire career.

“Sherry” is a teacher’s assistant who works in the 7th grade in a small, suburban school. She has worked in the 7th grade for over 15 years.

Common Themes

During the course of each of the focus groups, there were three themes that emerged common to all, which is to say each of the following themes were raised and discussed across all three focus groups – girls, parents and educators. These themes are:

1. Technology and social networking sites have had an impact on the occurrence of relational aggression
2. Parents are not equipped to respond effectively
3. More boys are engaging in relationally aggressive behaviors than they previously observed

Technology / Social Networking Sites. According to the participants in the girls’ and educators’ focus groups, while walking through a middle school, one can see students with cell phones, music players, tablets, laptops and electronic game consoles. Along with these electronic devices comes an abundance of applications (apps) and websites with which students can connect with their peers at any time of the day. For example, according to participants, social media sites and apps such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter allow the user to post messages and pictures to another user and also allow the user to comment on a post written by someone else. In addition, Kik is a free texting app that allows users to text with others who use
it as well. It should be noted that each of the aforementioned sites and apps require a user ID (identification). Snapchat, on the other hand, allows a user to send a picture or message to another user and this can be done anonymously. Messages, known as Snaps, delete themselves within 1-10 seconds.

To the extent that students can send and receive text messages, post to Facebook and Instagram, send a tweet or a Snapchat, or Kik with one or several of their peers at any time of the day or night, one can assume that there are numerous opportunities for harassment to occur and that being at home may not provide the safety from the schoolyard harassment that it used to.

Given the above, it may not be surprising that while focus group participants report that relational aggression is still occurring at school, so too are they clear that this is taking place online, outside of normal school hours. Participant reports from each of the focus groups suggest, for example, that girls can exclude other girls from activities online as well as in school. One mother, for example, echoing what other participants reported, described how her daughter has been excluded from social situations outside of school. As Holly pointed out, years ago, her daughter may not have known that all of her friends were together without her, but in the days of social media, there is online evidence of these get-togethers.

Girls will get together at someone’s house and they take all kinds of pictures and then my daughter is home and checks her Instagram and sees that all of her friends got together to do something and she wasn’t invited. So now, she keeps checking her Instagram and sees picture after picture of them having fun and she’s upset, she’s really upset and doesn’t want to go to school the next day. Before social media she wouldn’t have known that all her friends made plans without her but now she does. (Researcher’s note: parents are nodding and saying “yeah”)
Maria agrees with Holly and says, “Yeah…you see all these ‘check-ins’ on Facebook and my daughter knows that all her friends are together.” Nicole concurred and said, “Don’t forget all the tweets, too!”

In addition to the social media sites where pictures can be posted as described by Holly, others have reported that there are a host of sites and apps to which girls can send harassing and abusive messages to others. One of those sites is called Snapchat, according to several participant reports. One girl explained that Snapchat is a site in which one can send a picture or message to someone else and once it has been viewed, the picture or message disappears and cannot be retrieved. Several participants in the girls’ focus group reported that this is a problem for girls whose teachers and administrators have a policy of not getting involved in cyberbullying that occurs outside of school unless they can see evidence of the harassment. Illustrative of what others reported, Brittney stated:

This girl is Snapchatting me and like, sending me these disgusting pictures and saying like, mean things about me. My mom told me to tell my guidance counselor but like, she said she couldn’t do anything about it because I couldn’t show her the message. I can’t get Snapchat messages back. I don’t know how I’m supposed to prove it when it’s like, gone after I open it. (Researcher’s note: several girls responded with “I hate that” and “Yeah”)

Grace elaborated on this discussion and explained, “I get Snapchats from this girl from school of her and my best friend and like, she’ll take a picture of the two of them and like, say ‘wish you were here…NOT!’ I get stuff like that a lot.” In addition, Kourtney reported, “Yeah…I got rid of my Snapchat. I was getting pictures and like, my mom didn’t like that the pictures get automatically deleted so she made me get rid of it.”
Another social media app that the girls discussed in the context of their focus group is the texting app Kik. According to the girls, with this method of texting girls can start group texts and can invite several people to join in the conversation. Amber described an incident that happened at her school with Kik, “there was this big thing in 6th grade with like, Kik…I don’t know all of it but I know a bunch of my friends were in it and like, people were being really mean to each other.” Similarly, according to the girls, within this environment girls can talk badly about another girl and invite her into the conversation so she can see everything that is being said about her. Although this method of texting also allows a conversation participant to leave the conversation, according to the girls, one usually sees what is written before they are able to leave the conversation. Brittney discussed her experience with Kik:

I got these notifications on my iPod from my Kik and like, I’ll go check it and when I read it, it was all this really bad stuff…like how bad everyone hates me and there was like five people in the conversation. I didn’t even know who was saying stuff ‘cause like, they don’t put their real names.

In addition, girls reported that this method of texting is sometimes used to “set someone up.” Girls will Kik another girl to ask about a situation; for example, when girls perceive some type of conflict, they may Kik a person, ask about a third person and secretly add that third person to the conversation so they can see everything that is being written about them. Grace explained how a girl she thought was her friend, did this to her.

My friend was on Kik and asked me about something that happened in school. Like, this girl is not nice to me sometimes and I was like, mad about something she said. My friend knew that and I thought she was like, trying to make me feel better, but like, she wasn’t.
She made it look like I could talk to her and like, vent to her but she invited her onto Kik and she saw everything I said.

Equally concerning to these sites and apps is a social media site called Ask FM. According to the girls, on this site, girls create an account, post the link to their account and people can ask questions or make comments anonymously. While the posts are public, according to the girls there is no way to know who actually wrote the post unless the person identifies him or herself in some way. This type of social media site appears to be an invitation for cyberbullying. Jordan told of her experience with this site.

But there’s another thing, like for the cyber thing, there’s something called Ask FM and it’s an anonymous, ummm, website where you make accounts and people can go on it and ask questions, or actually, it’s not always questions, sometimes it’s just statements and they’re not nice…I’m not even allowed to have one and I never made one. But, I went on to my friend’s and there were like, just mean, wicked terrible comments. Sometimes, you don’t like, even know who wrote stuff. (Researcher’s note: Emily nods and says “It’s wicked bad”, Brittney nods and says “yeah”.)

This website, according to the girls, is an invitation for mean comments. Emily stated “It’s just mean stuff that people would never say to your face and it’s anonymous.” She continued on further to say “I am friends with everyone so I don’t get like, that hate I guess on ask FM I just got stupid questions.” The dangers of this site appear to be well known; in fact, most of the girls agreed that their parents know about this site and some are not allowed to have one. Kandice reported “I’m not really allowed to have that” and Jordan agreed “that was the only one I wasn’t allowed to do cause like, all my friends were hearing really bad things.”
Also of concern for the girls is the constant possibility that at any time, and without their knowledge or consent, a photo or video could be taken of them and shared with people. These photos and videos can be easily taken with cell phones and the subject may be unaware that they are being filmed until the photo or video is shared. For example, Brittney reported: “I had to give a presentation at school and like, I kinda choked. I lost my place and it was really embarrassing. Someone in my class like, recorded it and, sent it to my boyfriend.” Several girls in the focus group reported that a similar incident happened to them. In fact, girls reported that social media sites are not the only vehicles in which to humiliate someone and videos and photos being shared is quite common in their social circles.

Notably, girls and their parents are not the only groups affected by social media as a vehicle for aggressive behavior; in fact, educators find this aspect of aggressive behavior very challenging as well. Despite the perception expressed by girls and parents that school staff has a limited understanding about possible connections between victimization outside of school and difficulties while in school, educators reported observing how the use of social media as a vehicle for harassing a peer can have an impact on their students. Anne explained the impact this behavior has had on her students: “I think a lot of it is like, ah, the social media stuff. Even though it’s not happening in school, it’s being carried over into school, so the kids aren’t getting through their day as effectively as they could.”

To further illustrate how the use of social media has an impact on students in school, Laurie discussed an incident with a student that began on the social networking site Facebook and escalated rapidly. The incident reportedly resulted in a group of girls assaulting one girl.

Last year it was all about Facebook. This one was talking trash about this one, this one gets mad and we ended up with a gang of girls who beat up one girl. They were savvy
enough to take it a block away from the school, a block away from a crossing guard, they beat her up, I think she got kicked in the head a couple of times. All the girls ended up with court cases.

Likewise, educators are also observing that a student’s lack of technology can decrease the amount of relationally aggressive behavior that occurs among students. Laurie noted a difference in her population of students this year as opposed to last year:

A lot of my students this year don’t have Internet. They don’t have computers at home and they don’t have phones. So, they miss that loop, you know what I mean? Last year’s group of kids, I think, was more. It’s just the group of kids I have this year, I have less issues with. But again, the girls I work closely with right now, that are in my room right now, there’s no Internet, there’s no phone, they have nothing.

As discussed above, it appears evident that the use of social media has had an impact on the occurrence of relational aggression and has afforded girls the opportunity to harass their peers both in school and out. It has also provided a forum with which girls can harass other girls anonymously as some of the social media sites girls utilize do not require any identifying information in order to post comments or pictures. This presents a challenge for girls, as well as adults, in responding to these behaviors.

**Parents Are Not Equipped to Respond Effectively.** In light of the perception that most of the relationally aggressive behavior these girls are experiencing reportedly happen outside of school, parents appear to be on the front line and need to be able to respond to their daughters in an effective way. Participants in all three focus groups however, reportedly perceive that parents are not adequately equipped with the requisite tools to respond effectively to these issues. One example can be seen in the girls’ group in which some of the girls discussed feeling unsupported
by their parents as a consequence. For example, Jordan discussed what happened when she told her mother of an incident in which she had an issue with a female classmate:

> It gets frustrating because at the time, I just want her to be like “Yeah, she’s mean” but like, after a while I get like, she kept saying it to me like, “That’s not what you’re supposed to be doing” and now like, I realize like, I should not have… but at the time I was like “You can’t tell me that, you have to tell me that they’re mean” because I’m not doing anything wrong.

While Jordan spoke, Kandice was shifting in her seat and reported “My parents don’t really do anything, they just care that I’m not doing it and that I’m not involved in anything…I try to not to tell my mom anything anyway because she doesn’t help.” When the group was asked if they thought, in general, that their parents are able to help them with these issues, Emily sat up straight in her chair and said “No, not at all” as the other girls nodded in agreement and said “Yeah.”

As an illustration of some of the girls’ reports that their parents do not support them, Kandice explained how she felt ignored when she was having a problem with a girl from school. She has tried to tell her mother about the aggressive behavior that was exhibited toward her but does not feel that her mother is attentive to her needs. She went on to say: “My dad isn’t really home enough to get what’s going on. But my mom, whenever she is home, either shrugs it off, blames me or doesn’t even acknowledge that I’m talking to her.”

Similarly, the parents agreed in the course of the parent focus group that they in fact do not always know how to respond in a way that is helpful to their daughters. While most of the parents in this focus group felt that their daughters talked to them about what was going on, they discussed the need for proper training in order to deal with the issues facing their daughters.
Specifically, parents discussed the fact that since technology was not as advanced as it is today and there was no social media when they were in middle school, this is perceived by the parents as uncharted territory. Holly explained:

Parents don’t know who to talk to. I do think that’s an issue. I don’t know how you would change it but…I mean if the school provided…not telling us how to parent but saying, “Just remember, this may be a good thing to talk to your child about and if you’d like, you can attend this thing at school at 7:00 on Tuesday night ‘Keeping Your Kids Safe,’” or something like that.

This led to a discussion among the mothers about presentations that their daughters’ schools have hosted and Holly stated, “Nobody goes to those things.” Several parents agreed with Holly’s sentiments and while Kristen agreed that a lot of times parents do not attend these presentations, she reported that there were actually over 200 parents at the last presentation her daughter’s school hosted. Given that, she explained her thinking that there is a need for training to be useful:

I really think parents want this kind of thing. I know the parents I talk to do. We were really glad that the school was going to do a parent training on how to deal with all this cyberbullying. We had a room full of 200 people and it turned out to be that it was this retired police officer and like, he went on and on telling gruesome details of stupid, like, unrelated stuff and so it really was not specific to like, ‘Let me train you on what we know or what we’ve seen happening among this age group with kids,’ and stuff like that where the parents actually were there and willing to be involved and they blew it, they lost the parents.
While Kristen spoke, several parents said, “That’s too bad” or nodded their heads in disappointment. Kristen continued, “It is…there were parents who were really disappointed because they didn’t get what they needed.” Holly concurred by saying “I think education is really important.” Kristen agreed and stated that cyberbullying education should be offered “…and continue to put it out to parents”. Holly nodded her head and stated, “Yeah…to parents…I think we could all use education around that.”

Another interesting point that was considered among parents in their discussion regarding wanting training was the difference noted between parents who work with children and those that do not in understanding the issue of relational aggression. Nicole, for instance talked about how her clinical training has helped her somewhat, saying:

I do think, though, that despite my training, it’s different when I’m dealing with my own kid and sometimes I think it would be helpful to have parent trainings on how to talk to your own kids about this stuff. Sometimes I know what I would say to my clients but I think it’s different with my own kid. Not only that but I need training on what kind of technology is out there and how I keep my kid safe when she’s using it. Sometimes, I think she’s more tech savvy than I am and that worries me. (Researcher’s note: all parents but one were nodding their heads in agreement.)

Trish was somewhat quiet and appeared uncomfortable. She was asked if there was anything she wanted to share. She reported the following:

Just sitting here in this group and hearing you guys talk (Researcher’s note: she was referring to the mothers who work with children) makes me feel like I don’t know anything. I feel kinda bad because coming in here, I thought a lot of this stuff was girl drama. I feel like I definitely need training because I don’t know a lot about technology.
In line with parents’ reports, participants in the educators’ focus group also felt that parents were not adequately prepared to deal with their daughter’s perceived victimization. Several educators discussed the challenge in having parents respond effectively to their daughter’s needs when they believed the parents may have been too limited or there were emotional or mental health issues. As an example, when discussing how difficult it can be for girls to cope with this type of aggression, Laurie stated “…with the baggage they come in with from home…you know, you don’t know what’s going on at home…you don’t know if they have any kind of support at home to help them there, you know?” At this time, several group members were nodding in agreement. Anne agreed and explained:

I think a lot of times, these parents are so broken themselves that they don’t even know what their daughters are going through. Like, maybe if they had some training, on their level, they might know how much their kids are hurting and maybe they will tell us what’s going on. That’s the hard part, parents don’t really tell us when this stuff is happening. So, how can we do anything if we don’t know it’s happening until something blows up in school?

At this point, several members of the group were agreeing with Anne’s sentiments. Sherry spoke and said that she notices a need for parent training as well, going on to say “It’s interesting because we need to know when this is happening but at the same time, the mothers of the girls who are doing this need training too…where do you think these girls are learning it from?” “Anne” chuckled at this point and said:

We had this girl who was suspended for being a real mean girl. The police had to drive her home because the mother refused to come get her. We had a staff member go so the officer wouldn’t be alone. When they got to the house, the mother was out of control.
She’s screaming at the cop about our AP (Researcher’s note: Assistant Principal) and said ‘You tell that lesbian douche that I’m coming down there tomorrow!’ How’s this kid gonna learn anything different when she lives with that? I mean…you want to talk about parents that are not equipped to deal with their children? (Researcher’s note: three members of the focus group acknowledged having similar experiences with parents.)

In addition to the training needed to help parents support their daughters in a positive manner, Bonnie acknowledged that some parents are not aware that any type of peer aggression that happens outside of school can have an impact on their daughter in school. She said:

At times when I’ve had conversations with parents in meetings, I will tell them to let me know if something else happens and often times I’ll hear ‘I didn’t think it was a school issue if it happens outside of school’ so I think that’s an issue.

Hannah concurred and said, “I get that a lot from parents. It’s almost like they need to be told ‘Yes…we will help in these situations.’” They need to be educated about the law because I don’t think they know.” Sherry responded to this and said she did not think this was common knowledge. She explained, “It’s not like it’s really posted anywhere in school or on the website and even in more affluent communities where the parents might be more educated, a lot of people haven’t read the bullying laws.” At this point, a discussion ensued among the participants about how best to inform and educate parents about the law and what their rights are. Laurie reported that in her opinion, the best way to handle it would be in some type of parent training so the parents with whom she works could have it explained in language they understand. Hearing this, several of the focus group members agreed that training on their level would be valuable but commented that parents would have to “show up” in order for that to be effective.
Participants in all three focus groups seemed to have the perception that parents are ill-equipped to handle their daughter’s victimization. Girls seem to view parents as not fully understanding what the girls are experiencing. Parents, similarly, reported they perceive themselves as unable to respond effectively but would like training in order to recognize relationally aggressive behavior and to be more familiar with technology and social networking sites. Educators discussed their perception that parents are ill-equipped as well, however, in addition to not having the skills, they reported that they often work with parents who are aggressive themselves. The final theme that was common among all three focus groups is the emergence of mean boys, which is discussed below.

**Mean Boys.** The third common theme found among the three focus groups conducted is the emergence of what several participants referred to as the “mean boy” phenomenon. In other words, respondents attributed to boys that which is commonly known as the mean girl phenomenon. This well-known phenomenon is a consequence of a number of popular press books such as *Queen Bees and Wannabees* written by Rosalind Wiseman (2002), and popular movies, the most popular of which may be Tina Fey’s *Mean Girls* (2004). Starring Lindsey Lohan and based in large part on Wiseman’s nonfiction book, this film comedically depicts the ways in which social cliques operate among high school girls and how hurtful they an be. Recently celebrating its ten-year anniversary, interestingly, Mean Girls is even more popular a decade later than when it was first released (The Daily Beast) and as such, the catchphrase and its inherent meaning has permeated the culture. Relating this phrase to boys, upon discussing the topic of relational aggression in girls during the educator focus group, Sarah noted, “Hmmm…the ‘mean girl’ phenomenon….ironically, I’ve had more encounters recently with the
‘mean boy’ phenomenon.” Laurie agreed and said, “This year, my biggest problem is with the boys, not the girls.”

The educators went on to discuss what they reportedly perceive as a connection between the developmental period of middle school students and what they referred to as ‘mean boys’. It was acknowledged among participants that boys and girls are starting romantic relationships during their middle school years and break ups do not usually happen amicably. Sherry discussed an incident in which her female student broke up with her boyfriend and began getting harassing messages both in school and out. She said:

She just decided that she wanted to be with someone else. That’s what happens with teenagers. He didn’t like it. He was calling her nasty names as she walked down the hall and told all his friends that she was a slut. He was calling her other names too, real nasty, sexual names. She was getting text messages after school too. Then, his friends starting text her too, saying things like ‘I heard you’ll do this’ (Researcher’s note: sexual acts) and she was crying all the time in school. It was ridiculous. This is the kind of thing we deal with all the time. How is she supposed to do anything in school when she’s dealing with that? The boys are almost worse because it’s always so nasty.

This led to a discussion among focus group members regarding the severity of the behaviors in which boys engage that are targeted at girls. Group members agreed that the sexualized nature of boys’ harassment of girls has seemed to increase over the years. Sarah stated “It’s like they know what buttons to push…they go right for the jugular” (Researcher’s note: sexualized name calling is perceived as more hurtful). Anne agreed and shared that girls in her school do not want to be known as ‘easy’. She stated:
That’s the worst for these girls, to be known as some slut…and then to have boys spreading that around…’cause that’s what they do…it’s almost exciting for them to be passing that stuff around to their friends…then they just sit back and laugh when the girl falls apart.

Participants in the parents group also acknowledged relational aggression among boys and felt that it could be more hurtful because girls want boys to like them. Trish shared an incident in which her daughter took a risk in asking a boy to a dance.

She really liked this boy and was so nervous. She was very casual about and asked him if he wanted to go with her. He said no. She was really hurt but he wasn’t mean about it so she was trying to shrug it off. The next day, all his friends were laughing at her about it…saying things like ‘He’d never go with you’ and telling her she was crazy. It was awful. It was bad enough that he didn’t want to go with her but then all his friends made fun of her for it.

Nicole talked about her daughter’s experience with being told she is ugly. She shared:

These boys in her class are always walking by her, bumping into her desk and calling her ugly…my daughter has the most amazing eyes and she was even approached by a modeling agency…she’s beautiful…but because of these boys, she thinks she’s ugly.

Interestingly, there is a common belief among the parent participants regarding why the notion of mean boys has surfaced. All of the parents reportedly believe that while boys may physically fight other boys when there is a conflict, in the case of a conflict with girls, they will be mean. Mike agreed and said, “I always told my kid not to hit a girl…I was always told that too…I wonder if that’s why they do it…”cause at least they’re not hitting her” (Researcher’s note: verbally harass girls). Holly said she found that to be an interesting point and said “My
husband and I tell our son that too…I wonder if it happens because we don’t tell our sons not to be mean” and this led to an interesting exchange about how parents will tell their daughters to be nice but they do not give their sons that same message.

Similarly, the girls discussed being victimized by boys both verbally and through technology. They however, had a somewhat different perception from the parents as to why boys are engaging in this type of behavior. The girls reportedly believe that in general, boys lack empathy, which is why they find it easy to be mean to girls. In other words, most of the girls believe that boys do not feel badly about hurting someone’s feelings while girls have the capacity to feel badly. For example, Jordan stated, “Sometimes it’s actually worse with the boys because they don’t like, feel bad for you.” Another aspect of the mean boy phenomenon that was discussed in the girls’ and educators’ focus groups was the sexualized nature of the harassment. For example, the educators discussed the sexualized name-calling and harassment perpetrated by boys while the girls discussed “sexting” in their group. According to several girls in the focus group, “sexting” in their schools consists of boys asking girls to send them nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. Once these pictures are sent, boys will send them to all of their friends. “Jordan” explained how this happens in her school:

There are a select few (Researcher’s note: girls) who are like ‘yeah whatever’ just cause they want a boyfriend but they (Researcher’s note: boys) usually, like, they say ‘I swear I’ll delete it’ and they don’t and they show it to their friends and then they show it to their friends”.

Indeed, the ease with which middle school students can access technology and quickly spread rumors is increasingly concerning. Brittney talked about a boy in her school that started a
group on Google +. According to Brittney, Google + allows people to create online groups in order to have private chats within that group. Brittney stated:

It’s wicked bad. He said that my friend was doing all this sexual stuff to boys in school and there’s like, a hundred people in this group. So, like, in ten minutes, everyone saw this post. My friend was wicked upset and like, she didn’t even want to go to school. (Researcher’s note: Grace asked if someone at school knows about the site.) She can’t even tell anyone ‘cause like, his mother volunteers there and runs all these things and everybody loves her so what’s she supposed to do? Nobody will do anything to him anyway. Other people started posting things in there too and then my other friend got mad at her because she thought she did something with her boyfriend.

As shown above, there are similarities in the ways in which girls, parents and educators view relational aggression and the challenges this behavior presents. Participants in all three focus groups viewed technology and social media as having a significant impact on the way girls are relationally aggressive towards each other. Social media sites afford girls the opportunity to harass each other at any time of the day or night. Additionally, participants perceive parents to be ill-equipped to respond appropriately to their daughter’s victimization. Participants in the girls’ and educators’ focus group report that parents do not have the skill to assist their daughters when they perceive themselves as being victimized. While participants in the parents’ focus group reported feeling inept to deal with relational aggression, they reported that they want the proper training in order to assist their daughters. Lastly, participants in all three focus groups report that boys are utilizing relationally aggressive behaviors when interacting with girls. Parents reported that they perceive this to be because of the way boys are socialized; often times parents tell their sons not to hit girls but they do not clearly state that they should be nice to girls.
Girls, on the other hand, perceive boys are mean because they lack empathy and find it easy to be mean to girls because they do not feel badly when girls are upset. In addition to the themes common to all three focus groups, there were two themes distinctive to the girls’ and parents’ focus groups as well. These themes are discussed below.

**Themes Distinctive to the Girls’ and Parents’ Focus Groups**

The themes and perspectives discussed across all the three focus groups – girls, parents, and educators – is presented above. In addition to these themes, there were also particular perspectives presented in both the girls’ and parents’ focus groups only but not the educators’ group. Both girls and parents perceived that at times, girls use relational aggression as a way to retaliate for being victimized. Second, both girls and parents perceived that their schools and other parents do not respond to, or prevent these issues in an effective way.

**Girls’ Relational Aggression as a Means of Retaliation.** Participants in the parents’ focus group discussed the concern that their daughters may be using relational aggression to fight back, or retaliate, against other girls who they believe have victimized them. In fact, parents discussed how much easier it is for girls to assert themselves because technology. In other words, technology provides a safe outlet for girls to fight back without having to face their perpetrator. Holly talked about an incident in which her daughter believed she had been victimized. Her daughter tried to stick up for herself but then started texting the girl and calling her names. She stated, “She did a good job speaking up for herself but then she started retaliating in really bad ways”. Kristen nodded in agreement and said “I notice that too…my daughter will get so mad at how she’s being treated that she will text someone and tell them off…I know she wouldn’t have the guts to do that face to face”. Maria shared that she can see
why that would happen, noting, “These girls are trying to deal with this stuff and a cell phone gives them courage, it’s not ok but I get it”.

In addition, there was some acknowledgement among the girls that at times, they retaliated against their peers who have victimized them. Jordan, while explaining some of her difficulties with peers, acknowledged that she began engaging in relationally aggressive behaviors and said:

I think back to what I did, it was really bad and I don’t really, like now that I look at it now, I think ‘Why did I even like, do that’ like, she might have been being mean to me and she actually was but the way that I reacted to it wasn’t nice back and I didn’t handle it well but like, I don’t really know how I’m supposed to deal with it.

Emily agreed and said that she has seen conflict among girls continue for extended periods of time because there is so much retaliation. She said “It’s weird…it’s like people get really gutsy because they can call someone a nasty name or spread rumors about them online and then it never ends.” Some of the girls were nodding in agreement and saying “Yeah” while Emily spoke. Kandice admitted that if she had a cell phone, she could see herself doing that sometimes “You just keep thinking about it at home and you get so mad…yeah…I could see myself doing that.”

Ineffective Response and Prevention on the Part of School Staff. The second perception that several of the participants in both the parents’ and girls group shared is that parents and school staff do not respond in an effective manner. Included in this theme is the girls’ perception that anti-bullying curriculums are not addressing the type of peer aggression girls are experiencing. For example, when Jordan and Emily were discussing a type of anti-bullying curriculum in which they participated, they reported the following:
J: Like, it’s nothing, like, it’s really exaggerated and stuff.

E: Yeah, you can’t have exaggeration.

J: It’s not helpful at all, like, it doesn’t show you the right things.

E: Yeah, like it shows, somebody goes up to someone and says like “Hey you stole my lunchbox” or something and like, people don’t do that.

J: Yeah like it doesn’t really show the right things and it’s like, I don’t know, it’s not really great or helpful.

E: Because the stuff that actually happens, they don’t make videos about that and if you bring that stuff up to a teacher, or you say the words (Researcher’s note: words that are being said to the girls) they’ll be like “Don’t talk about that at school.”

This exchange led to a discussion among the girls about how their schools address these behaviors as a community when they arise. Most of the girls reported that their school administrators sent home emails about specific incidents that happened if it warranted one due to the number of students involved. For instance, Amber described an incident at her school in which students were caught using Kik to send nasty messages to each other. In this instance, the principal of the school sent out a mass email to the parents of the students in the grade level involved and informed them of the incident. When asked if there was any follow up in school after the email was sent, Amber said there was not. Kandice agreed with Amber’s statement and reported that there is very little follow up in her school. When asked how Kandice felt her school addressed these issues, she stated:

They don’t. If they feel like it’s getting too out of hand they just hold a big assembly and talk to us or have like, everyone there or something or just leave it alone. If it like, keeps going, they don’t do anything.
Following this statement, there was agreement from Emily and Jordan. Emily stated, “They always say ‘stop the bullying, we’re gonna do something big’ but there’s never nothing done.” Jordan echoed that sentiment and said, “They never do anything about it.” The remaining girls in the group were nodding in agreement and some said, “Yeah.” At this point, Kourtney stated, “They don’t do nothing and they blame me…they told my mother I needed thicker skin…why do I have to change? I’m not doing anything wrong.”

Brittney addressed the incident in her school in which a group was created on Google + by a boy whose mother is involved with the parent council. She explained:

Well, like, the thing that happened in my school. What’s the school gonna do? His mother does all kinds of stuff for the school. They haven’t done anything yet and like, I don’t think they will. They know about it ‘cause people told them and I know my mom did too in my conference. All they said was ‘Oh…I’m glad you told me.’ That was like, a month ago, and nothing.

Additionally, parents discussed this issue of school districts having an inadequate response to these types of behaviors. While one parent could report specific incidents of an administrator refusing to respond, several parents acknowledged that they are not privy to all that school administrators are doing to respond to incidents of peer aggression. They did, however, discuss the lack of follow through from administrators when a parent reports an incident of peer aggression. Jessica reportedly had direct dealings with her daughter’s school administrator in which he refused to act on behalf of her daughter. She explained:

The principal finally talked to me and said, ‘Do you really want to do this she-said she-said stuff?’ I was so mad. Then, the principal again tried to blow it off by asking me if I had taken steps before going to her. She didn’t want to know what was going on.
Jessica explained that she had tried several times to address these issues with the school staff. She asked to meet with the social worker at the school and reported the following, “…I met with the social worker first and the principal stayed in the room and took notes. She asked me what I could have done differently.” At this point, the other parents began asking Jessica follow up questions. Jessica further shared her experience with the school staff and said, “I wasn’t getting anywhere with the teachers or principal so I met with the superintendent. He was so sarcastic and said that the teachers come first. He didn’t believe anything I said.” Jessica reported that finally, she decided to withdraw both of her children from the school district. She and her husband now pay for their children to attend a private school.

While Jessica’s story is not representative of the group’s experience, some of the other parents reported that they were not surprised to hear of her experience. Holly shared her experience of schools not responding to incidents of peer aggression with the group, noting, “…there’s a lot of conflict on the bus but that’s not a school issue…a lot of the schools won’t address it.” Despite this, the majority of the parents in the group reported not knowing whether or not the administrators are responding to reports of peer aggression. Each parent in the group had some type of experience with their daughter’s school, either by knowing their daughter reported an incident or through reporting an incident of aggression themselves. The general perception about a school district’s response is that no one follows through on any given incident with the parents. Kristen discussed the incident at her daughter’s school that prompted an email home to parents. She reported the police were called and most parents with whom she spoke were relieved to hear that the police department was involved. However, she did not receive any type of follow up from the school after the initial email was sent home. She reported:
I had to ask my daughter if the police spoke to her specifically. It would have been nice to get an email, not necessarily with specifics about who was disciplined but in general, what happened. All we knew was that the police were involved. We were kind of left hanging.

Holly agreed and reflected back on her interactions with her daughter’s school. She stated, “I mean, I don’t know what they are doing behind the scenes but I feel like there should be another follow up piece.” Maria agreed and said, “I don’t think I often know anything else that happens. I don’t think we’ve heard anything major coming out of school.” To this, Holly replied “Yeah, I think it’s the school’s philosophy, and it’s probably across the board that, you know, ‘We’ll address it, don’t worry about it’ type of thing.” Mike also agreed and said, “You never hear anything about it.” He went on to say “I’d just like to get some feedback. You know, cause you don’t know if something has been done. You tell them, and then, ok, you go for weeks without knowing anything.”

Despite these examples of an inadequate response on the school’s part, the parents did identify areas in which their daughter’s school responded in a positive manner. Kristen discussed the email and subsequent police involvement that her daughter’s school initiated. She talked about how this enabled her to have a conversation with her daughter about this type of behavior, even though her daughter was not involved. In addition, Holly reported that her daughter was given brochures addressing internet safety and this provided a forum for her to have a discussion with her daughter about social media that she felt was very enlightening and helpful.

Distinctive Themes by Focus Group
Although there were several themes common across all three focus groups and two themes shared exclusively by the girls’ and parents’ focus groups, there were also very distinctive themes shared by individual focus groups. In the sections that follow, the distinctive ways in which each of the three groups viewed relational aggression and what they consider to be the biggest challenges are presented.

**Girls’ Focus Group.** Among the girls, an additional theme that emerged is the issue of relational aggression among friends and the perception that this behavior cannot be prevented. Most of the girls shared an experience in which a friend either harassed them or used a secret against them. Kandice talked about an incident in which she had told a friend about a boy she liked.

I put like, a secret admirer thing, like candy and stuff on his locker and I told my friends and one of them told everyone in school...I got bullied by it...everyone made fun of me. So like, I can’t tell my friends any secrets anymore because I don’t know if I can trust them. People kept making fun of me about it and like teasing me.

Kandice appeared sad when discussing this incident. Her voice became very soft and she kept her head down. She explained that she decorated the boy’s locker for a holiday and this holiday was quickly approaching. She shared that she no longer likes the holiday and despite this happening two years ago, her classmates still remember and tease her for it. While expressing concern that she would get teased again this year, Jordan turned to Kandice and said, “I think that people won’t, like since it was so long ago, like two years ago, they won’t.” Kandice replied that she was pretty certain she would get teased again. She said her former friend reminds her friends about the incident and then her classmates laugh about it.
Emily agreed that many times, problems begin with friends. She described her perception of the chain of events that occurs when rumors start:

You tell your best friend because you think they can keep that secret and then your best friend goes and tells someone else that they think will keep that secret and then that person, that your best friend told, doesn’t really know you so she’s like “Oh well, I don’t really care about this person so I can tell it to anybody” and then anybody tells it to anybody and that’s basically how rumors spread.

The girls also discussed how some of their current friends are actually girls who used to harass them. Brittney began this discussion by sharing the following account:

I was friends with this girl and we were really close. She was being bullied by this other girl and I used to help her, like, protect her. Her mother even said that I was a good friend and this other girl was like, really bad. I really thought we’d always be friends. Then, like, she started hanging out with this girl, even though she was like, so bad to her. Now, the two of them bully me together. I don’t get how she can like, forgive her for everything she did to her.

Jordan chuckled at this point and said, “I have one friend who actually, the biggest problem that I had with that one friend is the one that I am closest to this year.” Grace agreed and shared that she is currently friendly with a girl that used to be mean to her. She explained that she cannot control what type of behavior others engage in and explained her reasoning for forming a friendship with the girl, noting, “Sometimes you just have to like, let it go. It’s gonna happen no matter what, you can’t stop talking to everyone.” Kourtney agreed and said “Yeah…no one can stop it…like, it happens every day”. The other girls in the group were nodding in agreement at this point. It seems apparent that the girls feel like relationally aggressive behavior is inevitable
among girls and despite feeling hurt when they are on the receiving end, they are quick to forgive. Parents, on the other hand, may be less forgiving of the behaviors, instead worrying about issues of safety while simultaneously worried about breaking their daughters’ confidence. This idea is presented below.

**Parents’ Focus Group.** Two themes that emerged from the parents’ focus group was the fear that their daughters would stop talking to them and the difficulty they face trying to help resolve issues with the parent of the child who is harassing their daughter. The parents talked about the tightrope they walk whereby they want to respond in order to keep their daughters safe but at the same time, they do not want to break their daughter’s confidence. Nicole reported, “It’s really hard but sometimes, I have to have faith that she can survive this. If she says she doesn’t want me to report it, I feel like I have to respect her wishes.” While the parents agreed with Nicole’s opinion, the issue of safety seemed to be on the parent’s mind. Trish agreed and said, “I know…if it’s a safety thing though, I tell her I have to tell.” Nicole concurred and said, “Absolutely.” Maria shared an experience with the group:

A few weeks ago, my daughter told me about something that happened in school. It didn’t happen to her but it was still concerning. I thought about it for a long time and decided that if it were my daughter, I’d want someone to help her so I asked to speak to the guidance counselor to tell her about it. I didn’t tell my daughter and a couple of days later I’m like ‘You know, I have to tell her that I told’ and she was so mad at me…she’s like ‘I’m never gonna forgive you!’ and I said ‘I understand that’ and I thought, she may very well never tell me anything again and that scared me.

Kristen reported a similar incident where her daughter was getting inappropriate messages from someone at school. She reported the incident to the other child’s mother and was very concerned
that her daughter would be angry with her for telling the other parent. She explained: “I was really nervous, I didn’t know if she would talk to me…same fear like, ‘Oh my god….she’s not going to tell me anything.’”

In trying to resolve issues with other parents, Holly shared the following:

It’s tough trying to parent with other parents. You have these parents who are like “not my kid.” Then you have parents who don’t know what their kid is doing and they aren’t really monitored. Like, my daughter has to put her phone in a parking lot, or whatever, at night but not a lot of parents do that. I feel like a lot of parents don’t want to deal with this kind of stuff and when you bring it to their attention, because their kid is hurting your kid, they don’t even want to hear you. They just say “my kid isn’t like that.” It’s really frustrating.

At this point, Jessica chuckled. All the parents turned their attention to Jessica and she reported the following:

The father of the kid that was harassing my daughter actually called me and said he was in the ‘legal field.’ He laughed at me for saying I was going to get the police involved. He called me from work and told me he was taping our whole conversation. He was trying to intimidate me! I didn’t know what to do. Then, I went away for a few days and on the way home, my seat was bumped on my flight. I had to sit in another seat and when I got on the plane, [the child’s] father was in my seat! He was an air marshall and had me bumped. I had to sit in that seat, all the way home, while he stared at me. I knew then I had to get my kid out of that school because the school wasn’t going to help me and obviously trying to figure that mess out with [the child’s] parents wasn’t gonna work either! Sometimes, the parents are crazier than the kids!
Despite the concerns about their daughters not talking to them or having to deal with difficult parents, all parents in the focus group stated they would report what their daughters told them to the school or to another parent if a safety issue was presented. Most of the parents agreed that their daughters will probably be angry with them but they felt it was worth the anger to be sure a child is safe. Mike summed up the sentiments of the group and said, “I’d hate to find out a kid was dead after the fact.”

**Educators’ Focus Group.** Among the participants in the educators’ focus group, two additional themes emerged. First, educators identified the need for appropriate resources and staffing in order to effectively combat relational aggression. Second, the educators identified the challenges faced by students with disabilities and the challenges for students without a support system at home. These themes are discussed in depth below.

**Resources.** All the educators recognized that resources are needed in order to deal effectively with the issue of relational aggression. Specifically, the resources that were identified are appropriate staffing, educator training, class sizes and administrative response. Anne acknowledged the need for appropriate staffing in a school and said:

> Resources and available personnel are a big issue. We used to have a school officer and we don’t have that anymore. I just feel like that made a difference. He was only in the building part time but he had an office and just having him present…that makes a difference. And now, they’re talking about possibly cutting guidance counselor positions at our school…it’s already an animal house…it’s just crazy. The available resources have to be enough.

While Anne was speaking, many of the educators were nodding in agreement. After a discussion of what type of staffing each educator had in their school, Anne stated, “I feel like guidance
counselors are needed now more than they used to be” with which all participants agreed. Sarah
spoke about her district and reported that they only have one guidance counselor and explained
how that has had an impact on her school: “Sometimes we have kids who need to see her and
they have to wait until the next day because she’s dealing with something else. By the time she
can deal with it, it’s done.” Laurie shared that her district has staff to help deal with these issues.
As a special education teacher, Laurie shared that it is a challenge when trying to help her
students who are reporting being victimized because she works with a small population of
students. Consequently, she is not afforded the opportunity to have relationships with many of
the students in her school. As a result, Laurie relies on those support staff members who have
relationships with the general population of students in order to help her students resolve
conflicts. For example, she shared an instance in which additional staff, such as counseling staff,
proved to be an asset (Researcher’s note: Laurie was discussing what happens when one of her
students reports an incident of relational aggression) “…I’m not familiar with the other kids…is
that girl a mean girl? I don’t know. I set up an appointment with the social worker who knows
both sides. Then, it gets dealt with the right way.”

In addition to staffing, another resource that educators identified as necessary is training.
The educators acknowledged that even with a plethora of resources, unless educators are trained
to use the resources provided, they are not helpful. As such, if the resources provided are in the
form of additional staff members that may not be helpful unless said staff members are
specifically trained to deal with incidents of peer aggression. Further, the educators in the focus
group talked about needing training simply to better identify relationally aggressive behaviors.
Hannah talked about training in which she has participated and stated she has had to pursue it on
her own. She explained:
I’ve been to a couple of things. I heard Rosalind Wiseman speak, the one who did…what is it…Queen Bees and Wannabees, and like, read some of those books so I guess I’ve had some training in that regard but not a lot. We don’t get any training with regard to anything that relates to bullying as a social worker or counselor in (school district). We have to seek it out on our own.

Laurie agreed that training for educators is lacking. When her school adopted a new anti-bullying curriculum, she was required to attend a 1-2 hour after school training on how to use the program. She explained that the training was not sufficient for her needs in order to feel comfortable as a facilitator. She stated:

We were trained in that [anti-bullying curriculum] and it was like a one or two hour after school…just to show us how the program worked. I remember being trained like, in reactive response to students’ needs or students’ whatever…which is why I go to the social worker.

Sherry was nodding her head in agreement and stated that her school uses the same anti-bullying curriculum. She reported, “I have to run a group too. I was trained but I don’t know what to do when something out of the ordinary comes up. I have to get help.”

Bonnie discussed her concerns about knowing how to contain the ‘girl drama’. She had one student in particular who would seek out a certain teacher’s aide whenever she had an issue with another girl and use that to avoid her classwork. Bonnie conceded that often, there were times this girl was being victimized but it generally happened early in the morning and the girl did not report it to anyone. Bonnie observed that the girl would wait approximately three hours to report the incident to a specific staff person who would cause the situation to escalate because she did not know how to respond to it effectively. She shared her opinion:
I think they try to find somebody…an assistant…they want to talk to the assistant because I think in class they can pull them over. I also think it’s that thing where it’s like ‘is this a real issue’ or is it that ‘if I talk to her I get to walk out of class.’ I wonder if it’s not encouraged in that one particular instance. I think people feed into it sometimes.

Another issue that was highlighted as a determining factor in the educator focus groups was class size. In general, the focus group participants reported that when it comes to the issue of relationally aggressive behavior, a smaller class size is easier to monitor. The educators who typically have smaller class sizes noted having less peer aggression in their classrooms because it was easier to see with fewer students to monitor. Conversely, the guidance counselor, classroom teacher and teacher’s assistant reported having difficulty identifying and managing relational aggression among their students because of the number of students in the class to monitor. To illustrate this point, Laurie reported, “I generally have about six to eight kids in my room at a time. Anything I see, I squash right there.” Bonnie agreed and acknowledged having difficulty monitoring the class and observing relationally aggressive behaviors, “I think in the big class, people don’t see it as much.” Sherry also agreed and said, “When the teacher is at the board and I’m helping one kid, anything can happen. There’s too many kids to watch.” Bonnie repeated Sherry’s sentiments, “I think there’s too many kids.”

The final resource that was identified as a need in the educator’s focus group is an appropriate response from the administrators in charge. Participants discussed both positive and negative experiences with their administrators. While discussing their experiences, participants were cautious about giving too much identifying information and reported wanting to make sure their districts were not informed of their participation in the study and what they subsequently reported. Anne acknowledged, “I feel like our administrator (Researcher’s note: emphasis on
single administrator), we have two but only one of them does their job, does a good job with
dealing with bullying.” The researcher asked for clarification regarding this statement and it led
to the following exchange between the researcher and Anne:

R: Does the other administrator deal with peer aggression?
A: Will my name be in this?
R: No, it’s confidential
A: (Laughs)
R: There will be no identifying information at all
A: He doesn’t do much of anything so it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if it’s bullying
or not. He’s on his way out…“Talk to (other administrator)”…that’s what he’ll say.

Laurie agreed and said,

It’s true, the administrator makes a huge difference. We have a new administrator and
he’s doing a phenomenal job. Just, even classroom disruptions and everything has just
plummeted. You know, the rate of incidents that you hear about is so much lower
because he is just…he’s quick, he makes a decision, you know ‘you’re suspended, you’re
out’, done. You know what I mean? So, I think that’s had a huge impact.

Administration has a huge impact.

Sarah was nodding her head in agreement and acknowledged that administration can respond in a
highly effective manner but in her school, communication with the teachers following an
incident is lacking. She stated:

My biggest concern is the way administration handles these situations once they’ve
[students] been sent to the office. There is very little communication when one of these
situations arises and administration is handling it. Rarely do they let us know that
something has happened and the repercussions that resulted from these incidents. We usually document the incident and are required to turn it in to administration. The problem is that administration will handle it but won’t communicate with the teachers involved. We usually have to question administration until the information is provided and sometimes the answers are vague.

Sherry acknowledged that these incidents are handled in a similar way in her school:

We don’t really know what happens either. If we write up a kid, we’re supposed to get the bottom half of the form filled out and sent back to us but it doesn’t happen. So, we don’t even know if what we wrote up was dealt with at all. We only have one principal so it’s probably hard to do it all. There’s one kid in particular that is a constant problem with this kind of stuff and that usually gets dealt with right away but the other stuff…I don’t know.

In addition to the identified need for sufficient and appropriate resources, educators in the focus group identified a unique challenge in addressing relational aggression in their schools. This challenge is discussed below.

**Disabilities / Lack of Support System.** All of the educators that participated work with students who present with learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral difficulties or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The educators also identified an unstable home life as a challenge. They acknowledged that helping these students navigate their peer relationships is a challenge on its own without introducing any type of peer conflict or having to involve their parents in any kind of resolution to a problem. Laurie explained how the challenge impacts her students:

A lot of the kids I work with have emotional issues, you know, learning disabilities but I have a lot of emotional issues too. A lot of the times I hear ‘Oh I’m gonna go after
school and I’m gonna tell someone that if she looks at me again I’m gonna beat her up.’ And you ask ‘What is making you say this, what happened, what’s going on?’ and they’ll be like ‘Well she just looked at me’ it’s not really, they can’t put words. I wonder if that’s why they don’t come to me, they can’t put words to what is happening.

Additionally, the educators discussed the issue of their students misinterpreting social cues due to their disabilities. Hannah explained:

I have one student who comes to see me three or four times a week because she misinterprets something that was said to her. I have to take the time to do some in the moment teaching of social skills with her because she truly doesn’t understand and she walks around feeling victimized all the time.

While Hannah was speaking, Anne was nodding her head in agreement. She reported she has to address misinterpreted social cues frequently with her ASD students. She explained, “I have kids who don’t understand sarcasm so if they hear something, even if it’s not said to them, they immediately say it’s bullying.” As a result of this challenge, the special education teachers in the group reported they must teach social skills in the course of their time with their students. Sarah acknowledged that in her class, she does not have that luxury, noting, “I wish I could deal with that stuff right away but I can’t. Luckily, I have paras (Researcher’s note: paraprofessionals) in my room who can do that.”

Another challenge educators identified when working with students who are socially impaired is helping them so that they are not setting themselves up to be victims. “Bonnie” talked about a student with whom she works who struggles with this. She said:

There is a student, and I’ve seen it over the years who, they need the skills not to make themselves the target. And…you can’t think…well, no one asks for it but, in some ways,
they kinda do. It’s hard to say…you know, it’s things they say, they open themselves up and maybe that’s sort of that pragmatic piece, they need the help. You can say ‘Well, don’t say that’ and stuff like that but once they got you pegged as the odd girl, you remain the odd girl.

At this point in the group, the educators started talking at once and were agreeing with what Bonnie said. They acknowledged that it is hard to tell a parent that their daughter is engaging in behaviors or saying things that leave them open to being victimized. Anne stated, “It’s a fine line…like, you want to help them but at the same time, how do you tell them to change when they don’t understand what they’re doing?” Hannah acknowledged:

I meet with parents and the first thing I hear is ‘She shouldn’t have to learn how to defend herself, other kids should learn to leave her alone’ and that’s true but at the same time, kids are kids and they make poor choices. If they see some girl sitting by herself doing something strange, they’re gonna react to that. We try to teach kids that you shouldn’t always say the things that you think but we also need to teach kids not to do or say bizarre things and parents sometimes have a hard time hearing that.

This report led the discussion to issue of home support and how difficult it is for a lot of their students because parental support is lacking. This, the educators claim, has an impact on both the victim and the perpetrator of relationally aggressive behaviors. When discussing an incident in her class in which a student was harassing a girl repeatedly, Anne reported that she spoke with the girl’s mother but did not feel that the mother knew what to do. She explained:

I think she acknowledges it but I don’t really think there’s any…she doesn’t offer any solutions or any help. It’s just kind of like a fact to her. That’s how I kind of take it. ‘Yup, I know’ and she’ll roll her eyes ‘Well yeah…that’s her.’ I think her mother has a
lot on her plate because she has two sixth grade students and an eighth grade student and all of them have issues, medical and/or emotional or disabled, all three of them. So, I think that her resources are spread thin. I wouldn’t say she’s a bad mother, I don’t know, I don’t walk in her shoes, but I don’t think she has the skills to deal with it and help her daughter.

Bonnie was nodding her head in agreement and said “Those mean girl mothers…the mean mothers…they’re a huge problem too” to which all participants in the focus group agreed. Hannah concurred and asked, “How do you think they learned to act that way?” Participants again nodded in agreement. Sherry” talked about a student with whom she worked who was victimized frequently. She reported, “This girl learned to act that way by her mother too, her mother was being abused at home so how could she teach her daughter to stick up for herself?” Laurie summed up the group’s thoughts on this issue by saying “You don’t know if they have any kind of support at home to help them there, you know? I think a lot of the kids I work with…they’re just trying to survive, period.” In sum, it seems that the educators who participated in the focus groups perceived that having the appropriate resources influenced whether or not relational aggression was addressed in an effective way. In addition, the educator’s reported that trying to navigate through social nuances, including relationally aggressive behavior, was a significant challenge for some of their disabled students and, in turn, a challenge for the educators.

To conclude this chapter, a discussion of the ways in which the research questions that guided the study have been addressed will follow. Each question will be addressed in the context of the themes presented above.
Research Question 1. What is the experience of young girls who perceive they have been victimized by relational aggression and how have these girls responded?

The research question above was designed to explore how middle school girls view their experiences with relational aggression and to examine the ways in which they responded to their perception that they were being victimized. To address this question, a focus group was conducted with middle school girls’ who perceived they have been victims of relationally aggressive behaviors. In the course of this focus group, some shared experiences were highlighted through focus group prompts and discussion among the girls. As above, the girls’ experiences have been categorized into three themes: relational aggression among friends, the impact of social media and boys’ use of relational aggression. Additionally, the ways in which they have responded have been categorized into two themes: reporting relational aggression to parents and teachers and the use of relational aggression as retaliation.

**Relational aggression among friends.** Issues relative to relational aggression among friends were embedded in the focus group discussion. Most of the girls reported some type of relationally aggressive incident with someone they considered to be their friend. Additionally, some of the girls reported being friends with girls who used to employ relationally aggressive behaviors in their dealings with them. The girls discussed their perception that relational aggression was going to happen among girls regardless of what adults do to try to stop it. Moreover, they reported that since they perceived nothing could stop it, they could not stop talking to everyone with whom they go to school. Therefore, it was perceived as natural process to become friends with someone with whom they previously had conflict. In addition to relational aggression among friends, the girls discussed the use of social media as a vehicle to harass peers.
**Social media.** The second theme that emerged from the data was social media sites. According to the girls, this is the method by which most communication occurs with their peers. This, according to the girls, is also the method by which a significant amount of relational aggression occurs. With the onslaught of social media sites and text messaging, it is easier than ever before to target a victim at any time of the day or night. Sometimes, the individual who employs this type of harassment can be identified through phone numbers or screen names. However, some social media sites allow one to post or comment on someone’s page without identifying themselves. This creates a situation in which girls are not clear as to whether or not the perpetrator is someone they see on a daily basis. Additionally, the girls discussed unknowingly having videos taken of them and discovering they were posted online. Moreover, girls reported that their perception of relational aggression through social media couldn’t be stopped. If they use any social media site, they open themselves up to harassment just by the nature of how the sites work. According to the girls, anyone who views a post or picture can comment on it or share it. The ability to make comments or share posts and pictures reportedly leaves the girls feeling vulnerable. Additionally, while social media sites are reportedly making girls feel vulnerable to harassment, the girls discussed harassment by boys as another issue that makes them feel vulnerable.

**Mean boys.** While the focus group participants expressed the perception that girls use relational aggression as a way to harass their peers, they also acknowledged the increasing use of relational aggression by boys. According to the girls, boys will still use physical aggression towards other boys but they will engage in relationally aggressive behaviors to taunt their female peers. A belief that the girls shared was that boys do not necessarily feel badly for girls when they are upset so it is easier for them to engage in these behaviors. The girls shared incidents in
which they were teased about how they look or what boy they like. For example, one girl shared that a boy she liked told his friends that she liked him and the friends taunted her, saying that the boy would never go out with her. Additionally, one mother shared that she felt her daughter’s self-esteem had plummeted because a boy in school was constantly calling her ugly. Generally speaking, it was perceived that boys lack empathy and this was considered the reason for their harassment of girls.

As described above, participants in the girls’ focus group identified three areas in which they have experienced relational aggression: among friends, via social media sites and relationally aggressive boys. The following section will address the ways in which the girls who participated in the focus groups responded to this behavior.

**Reporting to parents and teachers.** The majority of the girls explained that they have discussed their victimization with either their parents, or their teachers, and in some cases, both. While the consensus held by the group appeared to be that neither their parents, nor their teachers were adequately equipped to assist the girls in coping with their feelings of victimization, this did not prohibit them from reporting the incident; however, all the participants in the girls group reported that they only report the incidents that they perceive as severe. Interestingly, the girls reported that they are sometimes able to talk to their mothers, specifically, about this issue despite the feeling that their parents are unable to help them deal with their victimization. These reports appear to be a vehicle for discussions with their mothers, rather than to reach out for help. Although the girls reported that they do not usually report incidents of peer aggression to school staff, some of the girls identified one teacher or counselor to whom they could talk about any type of peer conflict. In general, participants in the girls’ focus group reported that they reported incidents of relational aggression to their friends. This report,
Interestingly, led to a discussion of using relational aggression as a means of retaliation, which is discussed below.

**Use of relational aggression as retaliation.** In addition to reporting their victimization, girls reported that sometimes they retaliate against the person who is harassing them. Some of the parents in the focus group, when talking about their daughter’s experiences, also reported that their daughters retaliated against the girls with whom they felt they had conflict. Interestingly, most of the participants in the girls group acknowledged retaliating against girls who harassed them but did not always view their behavior as relationally aggressive. In other words, some of the girls in the focus group perceived their own behavior differently than the behavior of the girl who had ostensibly harassed her. In fact, they perceived their own behavior as acceptable because in their view, they were sticking up for themselves. Also of note was the role of social media sites as a vehicle for defending oneself or retaliating. In general, girls identified the use of social media as an asset in fighting back because they acknowledged that it would be somewhat difficult to assert themselves in a face-to-face situation.

As indicated above, the participants in the girls’ focus groups described their experiences with relational aggression. To begin, the girls discussed their experiences dealing with relationally aggressive behavior from their friends and the difficulty this can create in their relationships. They also discussed how social media has made an impact on the ability to harass someone at any time of day. Finally, they shared the sexualized nature of the harassment they experience from boys which is different than the relationally aggressive behavior that their female peers exhibit.

In addition to discussing their experiences, the participants in the girls’ focus group also discussed the ways in which they responded to their perceived victimization. The girls described
two ways in which they have responded to being relationally victimized. First, despite the girls’ perception that parents and teachers cannot help them, the girls shared that they have reported the incident to their parents and/or teachers. Additionally, some girls reported that they told their friends about their victimization. Second, the girls reported that they have retaliated against the girl who had harassed them. Interestingly, the girls who employed the use of retaliation did not consider their own behavior to be harassment.

**Research Question 2.** What are the other stakeholders’ (parents, teachers, school administrators) perspectives on the issues and challenges confronted by young girls who perceive they have been victimized and in what ways have they responded?

The second research question was intended to gain a better understanding of the challenges girls face when they feel they are being victimized by relational aggression. Focus group discussions targeted the issues that stakeholders consider to be the most challenging for girls. While the adults who participated in the parent and educator focus groups discussed many aspects of relational aggression, two main themes emerged from the data as to what the stakeholders perceive as the biggest challenges facing girls. The first is the increasing use of technology among young people and the second is the perceived lack of resources that parents and school districts have in their arsenal to address this problem.

**Technology.** The use of technology among youths has created a unique problem for adults and children when trying to respond to and cope with relational aggression. Technology and social media sites make it easier than ever for youths to victimize their peers. In both the parent and educator focus groups, this was highlighted as a major challenge both for the girls and the adults who are trying to keep them safe. According to participants, there is a significant amount of harassment through social media that occurs outside of the school day. Consequently,
the adults recognize that there is no reprieve for the victims and that more needs to be done to assist these girls when they are in school because their victimization can make it difficult for the girls to attend get through their day. In addition to the verbal harassment than can be conducted through social media, there is also visual harassment by way of pictures and videos. Further, parents and educators alike expressed concern over “sexting”. As noted above, according to focus group participants, “sexting” is a form of texting in which youths send nude or semi-nude photos of themselves to their peers. These pictures can then be forwarded to hundreds of people within minutes and once a picture is sent, it cannot be retrieved. In addition to pictures sent to individuals, recipients of these pictures, can then take screenshots of them – indeed pictures can be taken of any message or post – and then send to other people, furthering the number of viewers. According to the girls, a screenshot will take a picture of whatever image is shown in a phone or tablet. These images can then be sent as a regular text message. As a result of the increased number of people that these messages are sent to, and the difficulty in controlling the sharing of these messages, this creates a unique problem for girls, parents and teachers. Another unique challenge that participants in the educators’ focus group identified was the need for appropriate and sufficient resources. This is discussed below.

**Resources.** In both the parent and educator group, the lack of appropriate resources in school was identified as presenting a challenge for girls. The resources that were discussed can be organized into two categories. These categories include training for both parents and educators and appropriate staffing in schools. Training and appropriate staffing were identified as challenges because without proper training, parents and educators cannot respond to incidents of relational aggression effectively and therefore, they perceive that they cannot fully support their daughters and students. Some of the girls discussed this issue in their focus group as well.
In fact, when asked if she felt her mother was equipped enough to understand what she was experiencing, Emily replied, “I think that on some level she does but not like first hand”. Additionally, not having appropriate staffing creates challenges for girls because there may not be enough staffing to properly supervise students or school districts may not have the right kind of staff member in their buildings. For example, participants in the educators’ group identified budget cuts as a significant problem. As a result, school districts may have to cut counseling staff. Moreover, participants in the educators’ focus group shared the perception that without appropriate staffing, the school environment becomes chaotic and unsafe. Further, they perceive appropriate staffing as an issue that is non-negotiable when dealing with any type of peer aggression. Without this, they report, girls cannot receive the help they need in order to function throughout the school day.

It appears that the use of technology presents a challenge for girls who are dealing with relational aggression. Additionally, a presumed lack of resources in schools also presents a challenge to not only girls who are dealing with relational aggression, but also to the adults who are trying to respond effectively. Below, the ways in which adults respond is presented.

In the parents’ focus group, participants shared that they generally do not report incidents to their daughter’s school, unless they feel that there is a safety issue involved or there is some type of “sexting” occurring since the parents perceive those types of incidents as more severe. Typically, they either contact the other parent to resolve the issue or try to help their daughter problem solve. In general, participants in the parents’ focus group reported negative experiences with contacting other parents, however, they stated that despite this experience, they would continue to reach out to other parents when safety issues are presented.
The educators, on the other hand, either help girls problem solve and mediate or follow their school’s protocol in which the more significant incidents get referred to the administrator on staff. The difficulty in referring to the administrator, according to the participants in the educators’ focus group, is that there is no subsequent follow through communication with the educator who referred the student from the administrator. This leaves educators unclear as to whether or not the incident was even dealt with. Because of this, the educators in the focus group could not state for certain if their administrators follow protocol in their response to the referrals made.

In addition to the steps taken by the educators to respond to incidents of relational aggression, educators reported that school districts generally provide anti-bullying curriculums and they report this is a direct response to the bullying laws enacted in 2010. Despite this, educators reported that they often do not feel qualified to instruct their students using this curriculum. In essence, the educators reported that having anti-bullying curriculums were a step in the right direction but if they were not properly trained to administer the curriculum, it would not be successful.

In the course of the parents’ and educators’ focus group, participants shared many perceptions regarding the challenges middle school girls face. Many of the participants arrived at the focus groups ready to share their perceptions and the struggles their respective daughters and students face. In particular, participants found technology, specifically social media sites, and a lack of resources at home and school present a unique challenge to girls.

In addition, there appears to be a disconnect among the perceived home-school partnership. Many parents are not reporting incidents to their daughter’s schools, and when they do, they perceive that there is not any follow through from school administrators. Similarly, the
educators reported their own experience with the perceived lack of follow through from their administrators. In addition, the educators discussed their perceived inexperience in fully knowing in what way relational aggression should be addressed and how to implement anti-bullying curriculums to insure their effectiveness with their students.

**Research Question 3. What are the girls’ experiences of the stakeholders’ responses to their perceived victimization?**

This research question sought to understand how girls experience and perceive the stakeholders’ responses to their victimization. Focus group discussion and prompts were geared towards identifying how the stakeholders have responded and the extent to which the girls experienced this response to be effective, if at all. While at first, the girls were quick to point out that the responses from the adults in their lives were ineffective, they began to discuss specific aspects of the responses that were somewhat beneficial. From there, this led them to a discussion around what they thought would be helpful to them and the girls began to interact more with each other rather than with the researcher.

The participants in the girls’ focus group shared a general perception that their parents were unable to help them or at least had responded in such a way that the girls did not perceive them as helpful. Some of the girls acknowledged that their parents had reported incidents of relational aggression to school staff and noted that at the time, they were angry that their parents reported the incident because the girls felt that the conflict would get worse as a result. Looking back, some of the girls were able to acknowledge that their parents probably felt that they had no other option because the harassment was so bad. Participants also shared the perception that parents are more interested in their daughter’s role in the conflict, rather than their perceived
victimization. This discussion led the girls to a conversation about teachers, counselors and principals.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the girls were not aware of any administrative response to reports of relational aggression. They all had the perception that when they reported an incident to a teacher or counselor that it would then be reported to the administrator but they had no knowledge of the incident being dealt with. In fact, the girls reported they perceived there are no consequences for students who are relationally aggressive towards their peers. In addition, some girls reported that they perceive that their teachers and administrators will not address incidents of relational aggression that occur outside of school despite the girls’ report that the harassment is often carried over into school.

The participants in the girls’ focus group discussed parent and teacher responses to their perceived victimization. Specifically, the girls reported that there were mixed responses from parents. Some girls had parents who did not respond at all to their daughter’s perceived victimization and others had parents who would contact the school. While at first, the girls who had parents that contacted the school were upset about their parents’ response, they acknowledged that upon reflection, they understood why their parents felt that they had to respond in that way. Further, the girls shared that they were unaware of any response from school administrators. They had no knowledge of any type of consequences even for what they deemed to be significant offenses. This, they reported, made them feel unsupported by their teachers, counselors and principals.

Following this discussion, the girls discussed what they felt would be helpful in dealing with relational aggression. Some of the girls could not offer any suggestions or opinions of what would help while others reported thinking about it on their own when they knew they would be a
part of the present study. While there were some suggestions offered, there still appeared to be a general feeling that relational aggression is inevitable and cannot fully be prevented and that girls, without the help of adults, are solely responsible for stopping it. In wrapping up the girls’ focus group, when the girls were asked if there was anything else they wished to share with the researcher, Emily exclaimed “Stop the bullying, 2014!”

As shown above, participants across all three focus groups had shared experiences and perceptions regarding relational aggression. Additionally, participants in the girls’ and parents’ focus groups had shared experiences and perceptions that were not shared by the educators in the study. Despite these shared experiences and perceptions, there appears to be a significant disconnect in the ways in which participants address relational aggression. For example, participants in all three focus groups shared that girls are not always reporting relational aggression and even when they do, there is limited follow through on the part of teachers and administrators. Moreover, parents and teachers report limited follow through on the part of administrators. This disconnect led the girls in this study to perceive that there is nothing that can be done to combat relational aggression, nor are there consequences for the youths who exhibit this behavior.

In addition, there remains a concern as to how relational aggression is identified. Many of the girls shared that they do not report behaviors unless they are serious enough. Some of the behaviors that are deemed to be somewhat benign are, in fact, aggressive behaviors but the girls do not perceive this to be the case. Notably, when friends victimize girls, they often reported that this was not as serious because the aggressor was a friend; therefore, it was considered a joke or something that friends do to each other. Based on this, it seems that more needs to be
done in schools to send a clear, consistent message regarding relationally aggressive behavior in order to eliminate this behavior among youths.

Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

This concluding chapter leads off with a review of the problem of practice and research design chosen for the current study. I continue with a summary of the findings by recapping the common themes found among all three focus groups. I also present an overarching issue that was apparent in the focus groups. Following this I present a summary of the findings in both relation to prior research conducted on the topic of relational aggression and to social ecological theory. Finally, I discuss the validity and limitations of this study and conclude with a discussion of the implications for practice and areas of future research.

Summary of Problem

As put forth in Chapter One, Phoebe Prince, from South Hadley, Massachusetts, made national headlines after hanging herself in her home on January 14, 2010 (Hargrove, 2010) in response to being harassed, taunted and teased by her female classmates for approximately three months. She was only 15 years old. Recall, that as a result of this tragedy, national attention began being paid to the topic of female aggression; however, even before this tragedy, researchers agreed that aggression among girls is a cause for concern (Lamb, 2005; Yoon et al., 2004). Throughout the literature, relational aggression is also referred to as peer aggression, covert aggression and covert bullying. While the term aggression brings to mind the physical act of aggression, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have identified a more covert type of aggression to which they claim girls are more prone.

This covert aggression, identified by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) which consists of behaviors such as gossiping, dirty looks, rumors and exclusion has been recognized in the
literature as relational aggression. For girls, such aggression reportedly has a higher prevalence rate than physical aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Among girls who have experienced relational aggression, researchers have found that middle school girls report a higher incidence than elementary or high school girls (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). The reason for this, as explained by Davidson and Demaray (2007) is that middle school aged children begin shifting their focus from the family to the peer group and as such, friends and social status become much more important, leaving them especially vulnerable to peer aggression. Moreover, with the advent of technology and the inundation of social media into students’ lives, relational aggression has also flourished in a virtual space, which is a phenomenon well-known as cyberbullying (Norman & Connolly, 2011). Indeed, as put forth by Norman and Conolly (2011) the technology boom has afforded quite the opportunity to gossip and spread rumors via technological devices. As such, there is a growing amount of literature dedicated to the examination of peer aggression in a virtual space. Despite this growth, the literature has not adequately addressed this phenomenon from the perspectives of students and their parents (Sawyer et al., 2011) which is important as efforts are being put in place across the United States to combat bullying in its myriad forms.

Given the above, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school girls’ experiences of relational aggression and investigate the perceptions they hold based on those experiences. In addition, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers and to identify what these stakeholders see as the biggest challenges facing girls when it comes to peer aggression.

The study was shaped by three research questions:
1. What is the experience of middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized by relational aggression and how have they responded?

2. What are the other stakeholders’ (parents, teachers, school administrators) perspectives on the issues and challenges confronted by middle school girls who perceive they have been victimized and how have they responded?

3. What are the girls’ experiences of the stakeholders’ response to their perceived victimization?

Summary of Findings

An analysis of the focus groups transcripts revealed several cross-cutting and distinctive themes across the three focus groups – girls, parents, and educators. The three common themes included (1) perceptions regarding the use and role of technology in relational aggression; (2) perceptions about the ability of parents to respond effectively and (3) the perception that more boys are engaging in relationally aggressive behaviors than previously observed. Each of these themes will be summarized below.

Participants in all three focus groups reported the impact that technology has had on the incidence of relationally aggressive behaviors. For example, participants in all three focus groups explained how social media sites allow girls to exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors at any time during the day. Girls have the ability, with the push of a button, to spread rumors and make visible to their intended victim that they are excluded from a social activity. The perception that social media sites allow for girls to be victimized at any time during the day also led participants to note that, to the extent that girls are never getting a break from being victimized, the ways in which stakeholders need to respond to both the aggressors and victims must change.
Additionally, participants discussed the perception that parents may not be fully equipped to respond effectively to relationally aggressive behaviors. For example, girls perceive their parents as not able to understand what they are experiencing since the advent of technology has added nuance to peer aggression with which adults never had to deal as adolescents. Also, parents and teachers agreed that parent training on topics such as social media sites, as well as strategies for identifying and responding to relational aggression would be highly beneficial. Parents reported feeling inadequate when trying to help their daughters and teachers reported having difficulty in getting parents to respond to their daughters: both the victims and the aggressors. This creates a unique problem for stakeholders who are trying to determine how best to respond to relationally aggressive behaviors and what policies should be in place.

Moreover, participants reported that they perceive boys are becoming more relationally aggressive than ever before. To illustrate, girls reported the belief that it may be more difficult to cope with boys who exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors as they are seemingly lacking empathy and as such, according to the girls, it makes it easier for them to treat girls badly. In addition, parents and school staff reported having increased reports of boys exhibiting relationally aggressive behaviors towards girls than in the past. The boys may present a unique challenge because, according to participants, their aggressive behavior towards girls appears to be more sexualized in nature and this requires a different response from stakeholders.

In addition to the common themes that all participants discussed, there was an overarching issue that became apparent to the researcher upon analyzing the data. Based on participants’ reports in all three focus groups, there appears to be a disconnect among girls, parents and educators when dealing with and responding to relational aggression. Specifically, the two areas in which there appears to be a disconnect are the general lack of communication
among the three groups studied and the lack of follow through when relational aggression did get reported. This apparent disconnect among the three groups will be discussed below.

While it is true that some incidents of relational aggression are being reported to parents and/or educators, what is evident from the girls’ reports is that this is only happening when the victim perceives it to be serious enough, which from all accounts, seems to mean there are many, many more incidents that go unreported. Also of concern is that parents and girls are not always clear on what the school’s role is in combating relational aggression that occurs outside of school, even when the aggressor and victim are classmates. For example, some of the girls and parents were not aware that if girls were being victimized outside of school it could have been reported to teachers and administrators, especially if the aggressor was a classmate. Girls generally seem to hold the belief that they have to cope with this behavior on their own. Additionally, educators reported that parents and girls generally do not report incidents of relational aggression to them. Although educators are certainly aware of some of the covert bullying that occurs in and out of school, it is usually because they hear about it indirectly from other students, not from the victim. This, according to the educators, creates a situation in which they are unsure if they should respond because the victim did not report the behavior herself.

Another area in which there appears to be a disconnect is in what appears to be a lack of follow through once incidents do get reported. In other words, there seemed to be a domino effect in the lack of communication among these three groups. Once an incident of relational aggression was actually reported to administration, both parents and educators claim there is no communication back to them regarding the outcome. While participants in both groups felt that knowing the specifics of how the behaviors and/or the aggressive students were dealt with was unnecessary, parents and teachers also believe it is important for administrators to follow up with
them by at least informing them that the incident had been dealt with. Additionally, when communication is not forthcoming to parents and teachers, girls’ reported their impression that there are no consequences for their aggressive peers. As a result of this belief, girls then see no reason to consistently report when they are being victimized.

As indicated above, participants in the girls’, parents’ and educators’ focus groups shared three common themes in the discussion about relational aggression: the impact of technology, the perception that parents are not equipped to respond appropriately and the emergence of mean boys. In addition, the broader issue that the participants raised is the disconnect and lack of communication among the girls, parents and educators. In the section that follows, there will be a discussion of the interpretation of findings in relation to the literature.

**Interpretation of Findings in Relation to the Literature**

The findings from the present study are largely consistent with the literature. The role technology plays in relational aggression for example, was one theme common among all three focus group that has been similarly addressed throughout the literature. Another common theme, that parents may be ill equipped to respond effectively, was consistent with the literature in that parents are not always able to identify covertly aggressive behaviors. Both themes are discussed in the section below.

**The role of technology.** The literature reviewed highlighted several articles that discussed the role of the use of technology in peer aggression. For instance, Holfeld and Grabe, (2012) surveyed 665 middle school students about their experience with cyberbullying and found that as a consequence of the influx of technological resources in recent years, more and more middle school students are using technology on a daily basis and allowing them to exhibit aggressive behaviors while being able to hide behind a cell phone or computer. Similarly,
pediatricians O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) report that social media sites have become a hobby for children and adolescents and it is often this environment in which youths are targeted and harassed. Notably, the participants in all three focus groups echoed what the literature reported about the growing use of technology and discussed the challenge that technology presents in trying to combat relational aggression among youths.

Additionally, all of the participants in the present study identified social media sites as a haven for much of the relational aggression that is perpetrated among youths. Moreover, participants in the parents’ focus group highlighted the challenges of trying to protect their daughters given the extent to which technology is such a big part of their daughters’ lives while they themselves they are not familiar with these social networking sites that their daughters visit. Similarly, O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) argue, reporting on a national poll conducted by Common Sense Media, that many parents lack a basic understanding about online forms of social media in which their daughters are engaged. Not only do they often lack the technical savvy, they may not understand the extent to which their children’s virtual lives are simply another venue for their corporeal lives. In other words, parents may not understand how technology and social media sites are an important extension of their child’s life.

Further, parents and teachers reported that as a result of the increase in technology use and social media sites, it is easier than ever to engage in aggressive behavior with just a push of a button. Participants in the parents’ focus group reported that previously, leaving the school building would mean that a child who is being victimized would have a reprieve from their aggressor; in other words, home was a safe haven. That is not the case in the age of advanced technology where electronic devices can be used as a vehicle to harass someone. This perception is consistent with the literature reviewed. In fact, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) reviewed over 30
research studies in which the prevalence of victimization by cyberbullying ranged from 5.5% to 72% of teens. The wide range in the rate of victimization, according to the authors, was due to the different types of studies conducted; in other words, there were different demographics studied, different methodologies used such as surveys, interviews and focus groups as well as different time frames examined such as the incidence of online harassment in a week, month, or year. The authors further reported that the average rate of victimization in the studies they reviewed was approximately 25% (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). While the average rate of victimization is 25% of all students surveyed, there are demographic differences that show higher rates of victimization that the authors note. Gender, specifically, is a demographic that significantly changes victimization rates as most of the studies reviewed by Patchin and Hinduja (2012) report that girls are victimized at a higher rate than are boys.

Similarly, Kowalski and Limber (2007) studied 3,767 middle school students from six schools across the country and found that 22% of them were involved in some type of online harassment. Specifically, of the students surveyed, 11% (407) of the students identified themselves as victims of online harassment, 7% (248) identified themselves as both bullies and victims and 4% (151) identified themselves as bullying someone (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). In line with these studies, participants in all three focus groups in the current study reported that relational aggression that occurs among girls does not always happen face to face and the perception shared by all participants is that youths are using their electronic devices to taunt and harass peers.

The technology boom has presented other challenges that were consistent throughout the literature and among the participants’ perceptions. During all three focus groups, for example, participants shared their concerns and frustration regarding the anonymity of some social
networking sites. In general, participants in the girls’ focus group reported that their parents did not allow them to use sites in which identities are anonymous but this limit was usually set after an incident already occurred. Indeed, this unique challenge was discussed in Kowalski and Limber’s (2007) study on cyberbullying as well. As stated above, according to Kowalski and Limber (2007), 665 of the 3,767 students surveyed in their study had been victimized online. Of these 665 students victimized, 48% did not know the identity of their aggressor. They note that anonymity of the aggressor presents a significant challenge for stakeholders who are trying to respond appropriately to these incidents. Additionally, it creates a problem for girls in that they do not know if an individual, or a group is harassing them and they are unaware if the perpetrator is sitting across from them in class (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

In addition to the potential for the aggressor’s identity to be anonymous, Perrin et al. (2010) reported that when taunting and harassment takes place on social media, it has the potential to be seen by all of the victims’ connections. They found in their study examining depressive symptoms in 1,694 students in relation to cyberbullying that this type of harassment has practical implications in that the characteristic of being victimized via social media can cause the victim’s humiliation to grow exponentially (Perrin et al., 2010). Not only is the victim being taunted, she is taunted in a very public manner and once something is on the Internet, it is difficult to remove. Similarly, participants in all three focus groups shared their perceptions about the public humiliation that indicative of harassment via social media. Specifically, the participants in the girls’ focus group shared the perception that when relational aggression is employed via social media, everyone in their school is aware of what was said about them and it is difficult to escape the taunting.
It seems evident that the findings of the present study align with the literature reviewed in that technology has influenced the way youths exhibit relationally aggressive behavior towards their peers. Technology has afforded youths a vehicle in which to taunt peers at any time and this appears to make it difficult for girls to find a reprieve from the harassment. In the next section, the second theme that emerged in the present study that is consistent with the literature will be discussed.

**Parents are ill equipped to respond appropriately.** The literature reviewed offers some evidence that parents find it a challenge to respond to their daughter’s victimization. The literature does not however, address the need for training for those parents who wish to be better skilled at responding appropriately to these behaviors, nor does it address the idea that parents are ill equipped to respond to relational aggression appropriately. The majority of the studies reviewed that examined parents’ responses to relational aggression showed that parents made a conscious decision not to intervene on behalf of their daughters because of their perceptions of the aggressive act. Some participants in the present study expressed their frustration over not being better equipped to respond appropriately to their daughters while others reported that they choose not to respond because of issues that include: not taking the incident seriously, the incident was between their daughter and her friend, and the perception that their daughter was somehow responsible for what happened.

Given the parents’ in the present study’s perceptions, one could argue that their refusal to intervene is indicative of their lack of understanding of the nuances of relational aggression. In that respect, the parents’ refusal to intervene is indicative of findings from Mishna et al., (2006) who reported that parents do not understand relationally aggressive behavior and may not take it seriously. In this mixed methods study, Mishna et al. (2006) surveyed 157 fourth and fifth grade
students in four schools across Canada regarding their peer victimization using the Safe Schools Questionnaire. From those students, the researchers identified 18 students, nine boys and nine girls that reported the most frequent victimization. The researchers then conducted interviews with those 18 students, their parents (20 parents in all), 13 of their teachers, two vice principals and four principals.

The results of the above study, to this researcher’s mind at least, highlight the need for parents to be trained in the area of peer aggression despite the researchers not identifying training as a need. For example, parents in the study conducted by Mishna et al. (2006) reportedly did not perceive name-calling, which is a characteristic of relational aggression, to be serious and often reported that this type of behavior was part of growing up and a normal behavior in which youths engage. In addition, Mishna et al. (2006) found that parents struggled to identify what relationally aggressive behaviors were due to their covert nature. And finally, the researchers found that parents in their study perceived victimized children to present in a certain way and when their child did not fit the idea they had regarding victimized children, their own child’s victimization went unnoticed.

As stated above, Mishna et al. (2006) did not identify a need for training parents but some of the parents in the current study reported similar perceptions and felt training would be helpful in those areas. During the parents’ focus group in the present study, some parents acknowledged that they do not take their daughters’ victimization seriously because of what they identified as “girl drama”. Other parents agreed that the behavior may appear to be “girl drama” but they acknowledged that the issue was important and taken seriously by their daughters. Moreover, parents in the present study, similar to the parents interviewed by Mishna et al. identified the covert nature of relational aggression as a significant barrier in identifying and responding to
their daughters’ perceived victimization and reported that training in this area would perhaps be beneficial.

As discussed above, parents in the present study reported not responding to their daughter’s victimization because they were unclear as to whether or not their daughter had somehow caused the conflict. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Boyer (2010), in which three generations of a family were interviewed about relationally aggressive behaviors, a girl, her parents and her grandparents. Interestingly, both the parents and the grandparents were unsure as to whether or not the young girl had somehow caused the aggressors to treat her badly and consequently did not respond in any way. In addition to this study, Sawyer et al. (2011) interviewed 20 parents to investigate their perceptions of peer aggression and reported that most parents did not respond to their daughter’s reports of victimization because parents were unclear as to whether or not their daughter had some responsibility in what happened by causing the aggressor to be angry. Parents in the present study similarly were split on this issue: some parents reported that they did not respond because they were unclear of their daughter’s role while others reported that they responded but also tried to encourage their daughters to think reflectively about what they could have done differently in the process.

As indicated above, none of the literature reviewed addressed the issue of parents wanting to be trained in order to respond appropriately to their daughter’s victimization; however, the literature did acknowledge that parents do not always know how to respond to relational aggression appropriately. While the lack of training was identified in the present study as part of the reason that parents are ill equipped to respond to these issues, one could assume that the acknowledgement in the literature that parents do know always know how to respond
could be because there is a lack of training. To conclude the discussion about the findings in relation to the literature, there is one final theme to discuss: boys are more relationally aggressive than previously perceived by participants. While, in general, this not consistent with the literature reviewed, there are studies that identify boys as employing relationally aggressive behavior. This finding is discussed below.

**Relationally aggressive boys.** Interestingly, the finding from the present study that boys are employing relationally aggressive behaviors is not consistent with what was discovered in the literature. According to Crick and Grotpeter (1995) for example, girls have been identified as the gender that typically employs covert means to victimize peers, however, study participants in all three focus groups reported that boys are engaging in these behaviors more so than previously observed. It is important to note, however, that Davidson and Demaray (2007) cautioned that there are inconsistencies in the research when reporting on gender and relational aggression. Additionally, while Crick and Grotpeter (1995) specifically report that girls are more apt to employ relationally aggressive behaviors, they also state that does not preclude boys from using these behaviors as well. Nevertheless, most of the studies reviewed on relational aggression indicate that girls are the ones who primarily employ this type of behavior. Despite the inconsistencies found in the literature, participants in all three focus groups indicated that their perception, on the basis of their experience, is that boys are using relationally aggressive behaviors just as much as, if not more so than, girls.

Contrary to many of the studies in which girls are identified as more relationally aggressive than boys, but similar to participant reports in the present study, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) found that boys are using technology to harass their peers just as much, if not more, than girls are. The researchers conducted a study in which they surveyed approximately 4,400 11-18
year olds in a large school district in southern United States. The surveys included questions regarding the students’ use of technology to cyberbully their peers. Results showed that when examining cyberbullying behavior over the previous year, 21.3% of girls harassed their peers online while 17.5% of boys engaged in the same behavior. However, when examining cyberbullying behavior over the previous two months, results showed that more boys (9.3%) were employing more cyberbullying behaviors than were girls (7.9%). Patchin and Hinduja (2012) hypothesized that the reason for this is that historically, girls have employed more covert means of harassing their peers while boys have just recently begun engaging in those types of behaviors whereas previously, they did not.

Additionally, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) found that girls were more likely to spread rumors online where boys were more likely to post a mean or hurtful photo. This is somewhat inconsistent with the findings of the present study in which girls are reportedly in agreement with findings in the literature demonstrating that their female peers spread rumors, engaged in purposeful exclusion, name-calling and harassment on social media. Their reported perception that boys’ harassment tends to use more sexualized taunts than girls however, was not consistent with the findings in the literature; indeed that was not a finding in any of the studies reviewed. This aspect of relational aggression is important to the present study because participants in the educators’ focus group reported that boys’ use of relational aggression has such a significant impact on their school community because of the sexualized nature of the behavior. The common perception among educators in the focus group was that girls do not react strongly to being called a “bitch” but they have a very strong reaction to being called a “slut” or “whore” and this reaction can be disruptive to the school environment.
In sum, consistent with only one study (Patchin’s and Hinduja’s 2012), findings from the present study seemed to illustrate that boys are exhibiting relationally aggressive behaviors at a rate that is comparable to that of girls. This finding is largely inconsistent with the majority of the literature reviewed however, which shows that girls are more relationally aggressive than boys. Surprisingly, the sexualized nature of the boys’ aggression in the present study, was not even identified with the literature. This is indeed, an area in which more examination is needed. The interpretation of the study’s findings, in relation to the theoretical framework will be discussed below.

**Interpretation of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The systems-ecological theory (Barboza, 2005) provided a valuable lens through which to consider relational aggression among middle school girls. According to systems-ecological theory, the aggressive relationship between two people can be influenced by the different nested systems or social contexts in a person’s life such as the family, peer group and school and this framework is the lens through which many researchers examine relational aggression. Barboza (2005), for example, postulated that at the core of any aggressive relationship is the interaction between the aggressor and the victim, which plays out in the various contexts of a child’s life. Similarly, Swearer and Espelage (2004) stated that aggressive behavior does not occur in isolation and that the behavior is either encouraged or discouraged depending on the relationships between the individual, family, peer group, school and culture. These contextual factors, as well as the individual factors are discussed below.

When using the systems ecological theory as a lens through which to examine aggressive behavior, there are individual factors that should be considered such as gender, previous victimization, self-advocacy and race/ethnicity at work when thinking of victims of aggressive
behavior. Swearer and Espelage (2004), note for example, state that an individual’s characteristics can help determine whether or not a child engages in being a victim. These individual characteristics can include qualities such as a disability, previously observed “odd” behavior, inability to self-advocate or a child’s gender. This notion is consistent with the participants in the educators’ focus group discussion. Educators reported that at times, some girls were viewed as easy victims because of the way they acted or because of a disability they may have. For example, girls who have social pragmatic difficulties and have limited capacity to accurately read social cues were viewed by educators as needing to be taught not to bring negative attention to themselves. Additionally, educators shared that when girls act bizarre in school, they become “the odd girl” in school and this creates a situation in which these girls are easily and continuously victimized.

While individual factors can influence a child’s engagement in being a victim, the family system, or microsystem according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), can also influence a child who might be engaged in an aggressive relationship. Specifically, Mishna (2004) reported that the adult/child relationship can influence a child’s ability to manage certain areas of their lives, hence, in relation to aggressive relationships, if a child perceives their family system to be supportive, they are better able to cope with the conflict. In line with the present study for example, many of the participants in the girls’ focus group shared that they talk to their mothers about peer conflict. These girls shared that while their mothers may not always say or do the right things, in general they felt supported, especially if their perceived victimization was believed by their parents to be serious. In addition, the family system can also be disrupted by the victimization of one member of the family. For example, in the present study, this was discussed similarly during both the girls’ and parents’ focus groups; participants reported that
during the worst of the peer conflict the girls experienced, the family system was notably disrupted. For example, girls were reportedly more irritable and moody as a consequence of their perceived victimization, which in turn, caused conflict at home with both siblings and parents. This finding from the present study is consistent with the tenet of systems ecological theory suggesting that the family system can influence the individual as much as the individual can influence the family system (Barboza, 2005; Mishna, 2004).

Another system that is impacted by relational aggression is the peer group (Barboza, 2005). Peers can be supportive or unsupportive and relational aggression can occur among friends (Mishna, 2004). In the present study, participants in the girls’ focus group discussed their perceived victimization by peers whom they had considered to be their friends. Additionally, girls also reported that when relational aggression occurs among friends, other girls in their friendship group would take sides or would avoid the victim in the aggressive relationship for fear that they themselves would be victimized.

Changes in peer groups can also influence relationally aggressive behaviors (Swearer and Espelage 2004). This is consistent with the finding from the present study that girls were experiencing relational aggression among friends and then becoming friends with girls who previously harassed them. Changes in classes and the commencement of school/recreational activities sometimes put both the victim and the aggressor together and this helped foster a relationship. It appeared that once the girls began a friendship with the girls who previously harassed them, the harassment began to decrease and eventually stopped. Conversely, girls reported that if they began to drift away from someone they considered to be their best friend, at times, the friend would start harassing them. The peer group, according to the participants in the girls’ focus group, was perceived as one of the most important systems in the girls’ lives.
The relationship between home and school, which, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) is the mesosystem, or the relationship between two or more microsystems, can also have an influence on relational aggression. For example, the relationship between the family and the school can influence whether or not relational aggression is reported and subsequently addressed. If parents feel that educators are responsive to reports of relational aggression, they may be more apt to report their daughter’s victimization. In turn, if educators have good working relationships with parents, they may be more apt to respond appropriately to reports of relational aggression.

In the present study, both girls and parents discussed their perceptions about their relationship with school staff when trying to respond appropriately to relational aggression. Parents reported that as their frustration grew with not receiving follow through communication from school, upon their daughters becoming aware that there was no follow through, they too were impacted. In other words, according to some of the girls, this lack of follow through caused them to feel hopeless about the amount of aggression they were experiencing ever decreasing and also led them to the perception that peer aggression cannot be stopped.

Another a system discussed by participants in the girls’ focus group is the social structure of the school, referred to as the exosystem by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The exosystem can include, among other things, the anti-bullying programs and teacher trainings on how to respond to aggressive behavior among students (Barboza et al., 2009). Interestingly, participants in the girls focus group discussed their anti-bullying programs in school and echoed what Mishna (2004) found in her study: anti-bullying programs do not take into consideration the dynamics of relationships and the attachments that youths have with their friends. In the present study, the girls talked about their anti-bullying programs and reported that the scenarios provided as part of the anti-bullying curriculum were irrelevant to what actually occurs in their schools.
Interestingly, the girls reported that they would buy into their anti-bullying programs if the issues with which they were dealing were addressed. Girls reported that these programs should include scenarios that address cyberbullying, relational aggression among friends and relational aggression exhibited by boys. In addition to the curriculum itself being problematic for girls, educators in the present study identified lack of training and resources in how to effectively teach anti-bullying curriculums as a challenge for them in combatting relational aggression. Educators reported that they do not feel they have the skill set in order to effectively teach an anti-bullying curriculum, nor do they have the skill set to handle any issues that the girls present. The training for educators and appropriate anti-bullying instruction for students helps shape the social structure of the school. Without this system in place, girls are vulnerable to ongoing victimization.

Finally, the last system discussed in the present study put forth by Bronfenbrenner (1979) is the macrosystem, or culture of the participants’ respective schools. The salience of this, for the purpose of the present study, is the extent to which girls felt that relational aggression was responded to consistently and its influence on the culture of the school. In other words, girls in the present study reported that the culture of their schools were such that there are no consequences for relationally aggressive behavior. Parents similarly reported their beliefs that the culture of the schools was lacking follow through when dealing with relational aggression. To the extent that educators reported their perception that their administrators influence the culture of the school, when some administrators effectively responded to relationally aggressive behavior, that in turn, had a positive influence on the culture of the school. For example, educators who perceive that their administrators effectively respond to relationally aggressive behaviors find that there is a decrease in the occurrence of that type of behavior. Conversely,
other administrators, who, according to reports from some of the educators in the present study did not respond effectively to aggressive behaviors, consequently, they had a negative influence on the culture of the school. Specifically, these educators reported that students who engage in relationally aggressive behaviors do so more often. In fact, students have reportedly told these educators, when there were limits set around their behavior, that they knew there would be no consequences for their behavior.

As indicated above, the present study is well-framed employing systems-ecological theory. This theory afforded the researcher the opportunity to examine relational aggression as it relates to all factors involved in participants’ lives, including individual, family, peer and school community. In addition, this framework afforded the researcher the opportunity to examine how these subsystems interacted together in relation to peer aggression. This was important to the present study in that many different contexts need to be working together in order that relationally aggressive behaviors are responded to in a meaningful way and ultimately decreased.

In sum, all focus group participants offered evidence that supported the decision to view this problem through the lens of the systems-ecological framework. Specifically, participants reported that the different systems in the girls’ lives (peer, family, school) are impacted by relational aggression regardless of where the behavior has occurred. Moreover, participants reported that the consequences of this behavior permeates the various systems in the girls’ lives; for example, being victimized by relational aggression can impact girls in their peer groups, families and school community. This validates the perception held by parents and educators regarding the need for there to be a strong home-school partnership in order to combat this behavior.

**Conclusion**
Educators, parents and students alike have long struggled with how to respond to peer aggression and relational aggression, which, with its covert nature, presents a unique challenge. While stakeholders acknowledge that relational aggression is an issue to which they need to respond, they could not offer solutions as to how to meet the challenges that responding to this behavior presents. Educators and parents who participated in focus groups shared their frustrations at their inability to assist girls who are experiencing this type of behavior.

Despite the fact that school districts have provided some training, both for parents and teachers, in how to address relational aggression and schools often have anti-bullying curriculums that they present to their students, relational aggression in middle schools remains a steady problem. In general, participants in the girls’ focus group report feeling hopeless about this changing; according to them, relational aggression, and peer aggression in general, cannot be stopped.

According to participants in the girls’ focus group, girls are facing a unique challenge in that their closest friends often victimize them. Parents and educators reportedly do not always know how to address this aspect of relational aggression because they are not sure the conflict between the girls is aggression or just a conflict that will resolve itself. Most participants in all three focus groups reported struggling with how to respond to relational aggression among friends.

Additionally, the girls reported that boys are relationally aggressive towards them in a sexualized manner. This unique characteristic of relational aggression was not addressed in the literature reviewed. Most of the findings, however, were consistent with the literature reviewed. Nevertheless, there were some inconsistencies in the literature but this provides the researcher with areas for future study.
In retrospect, the use of the systems-ecological theory was the ideal framework in which to examine relational aggression in the context of this study. Conducting focus groups with girls, their parents and middle school educators provided evidence that relational aggression affects girls in all areas of their social ecology and because of this, responses to relational aggression need not only to be consistent, they need to be effective. The tenets of systems-ecological theory takes into consideration all the contexts in the girls’ lives, including girls as individuals, their families, peer groups, school environment and the larger community. Because this framework was employed, the disconnect in communication between the girls, parents and educators became clear. As evidenced by the findings in this study, relational aggression can permeate all of the contexts of a child’s life and the systems-ecological theory allows the lens through which to view these contexts.

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

Maintaining validity of a qualitative study can be accomplished by ensuring the researcher has taken steps to ensure reliability and validity of the data. Creswell (2009) reports this can be accomplished when the researcher has taken steps to check for accuracy of the data collected. In addition, qualitative reliability occurs when the researcher has a consistent approach to conducting the research (Creswell, 2009).

In order to increase the validity of the present study, the researcher asked clarifying questions of the participants to ensure accuracy of their perceptions and to allow participants to expand on their thoughts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Upon the conclusion of the focus groups, the researcher manually transcribed the data from each focus group. Following this, the researcher listened to the recordings from the focus groups on three additional occasions while reading the
transcripts to be sure the data was transcribed accurately. This process was consistent throughout the three focus groups.

Personal bias should be considered as a threat to the validity of the present study. As a parent and educator, the researcher was aware that participants in the focus groups might express opinions that could be viewed as negative. The researcher considered this when creating discussion prompts and took extra care in allowing those opinions to be voiced. Further, because some of the participants had a previous relationship with the researcher, boundaries were kept clear by not allowing participants to stray off topic.

A limitation of the present study that was discussed in Chapter III is the number of subjects that participated in the study. Because of the limited amount of participants, results may not be considered generalizable to the middle school population. In addition, because the schools that the girls attended and the schools in which educators were employed by are all in the same geographical area, many of the participants shared that they utilize similar anti-bullying programs and have similar policies in place. Given that, it is not known if participants would have a different experience and therefore different perceptions if the schools had a variety of different anti-bullying programs and policies. Because of this, the present study cannot be generalized to other schools.

**Recommendations for Practice and Further Study**

On the basis of the findings from the present study, several recommendations can be made for practice and further study. The findings of this study provide a springboard for implementing changes in practice within schools when dealing with relational aggression. Most importantly, appropriate training for both educators and parents needs to be implemented and should be conducted on an ongoing basis. Because the findings of the present study indicate that
both parents and educators shared the perception that they are not adequately equipped to respond appropriately to incidents of relational aggression, training is vital. Additionally, this training should include not only the strategies for appropriately responding to relational aggression but, strategies to identify relationally aggressive behaviors for parents and educators as this is the first step in combatting this behavior. Parents and educators acknowledged that they are sometimes unclear as to what constitutes ongoing relational aggression as opposed to what is a minor conflict that resolves itself. Moreover, parents need to be trained on the various social media sites that their children are using and the risks involved in using those sites. For those parents who cannot, or historically do not attend sessions such as these, outreach should be provided so information is shared and available to all parents. Further, parents’ who participated in the study shared the perception that they are not qualified to respond to some instances of cyberbullying since they cannot keep up with the advancement of technology. This issue, especially, requires ongoing training, support and open communication between parents, teachers and administrators.

The findings of the present study also indicated a need for universal policies with common language for school personnel. As participants in the girls’ focus group reported, whether and how relational aggression is responded to is contingent upon the person to whom it is reported. In other words, the girls shared the perception that certain teachers will respond in a helpful manner while others will not. Additionally, both girls and educators alike also shared that administrators respond inconsistently. In fact, girls and educators who reported having two administrators in their school buildings reported that there is a difference in how each administrator responds to reports of relational aggression. This inconsistency in responses can exacerbate the problem and leave girls feeling that their voices are not heard.
Finally, anti-bullying programs that schools are using must be revisited. According to the participants in the girls’ focus group, many of the anti-bullying programs to which girls are exposed do not address the particular type of peer aggression that they are experiencing. In fact, many of the girls reported that their schools’ anti-bullying programs were not at all relevant to them given the topics discussed in the curriculum. In other words, according to the participants in the girls’ focus group, the program’s curriculum does not address the specific types of peer aggression that girls are experiencing. For example, according to the girls, anti-bullying programs do not address sexting, relationally aggressive boys, and the use of technology. As such, they reported their belief that there is not enough instruction as part of the anti-bullying curriculum to assist girls with the social nuances of relational aggression among friends. This appeared, according to the girls in the present study, to be a significant cause of angst for them.

Rather than investing in anti-bullying curriculums, administrators and educators should examine what types of aggressive behaviors are occurring in schools and create a culture in which this behavior is constantly monitored and addressed. This could include more authentic instruction on the basis of the behaviors that are actually occurring in schools, rather than a curriculum that addresses behaviors that may be irrelevant to students. Additionally, given that some of the behaviors that the girls discussed were, indeed, relationally aggressive behaviors though the girls did not view them as such, this culture shift should include instruction as to the identification of relationally aggressive behaviors and appropriate ways to respond. Finally, part of the culture shift should include ongoing discussions that can address problem solving and conflict resolution and a forum in which students could create smaller communities with those peers with whom they spend the most time throughout the day. This will allow students and
teachers to be reflective about their behavior and encourage the culture shift that is needed in
schools in order to decrease this type of behavior.

As explained above, the present study reinforces the need for some changes to schools’
anti-bullying curriculums and policies. In addition, the findings also reinforce the need for topic
specific trainings on an ongoing basis in order to assist parents and teachers in identifying and
appropriately responding to relational aggression. Finally, the study’s findings reinforce the
need for school personnel to adopt a universal language to increase the level of consistency in
responding to incidents of relational aggression. To close this section, the areas of further study
will be discussed below.

The findings of this study illustrated the need for further study of relational aggression
among youths. Given that a common theme among the three focus groups was the perception
that boys are employing relationally aggressive behavior more than previously observed, the use
of relational aggression among boys, and the perceived sexualized nature of the harassment
should be examined more closely. Participants in the girls’ focus group had the perception that
being taunted or harassed by a boy was more difficult to cope with due to the sexualized nature
of the harassment. This perception should be investigated more fully as well. This would
provide much needed data in order to appropriately inform anti-bullying curriculums.

In addition to investigating relational aggression specifically in boys, a study with a
larger sample size that investigates relational aggression among middle school students, both
boys and girls, should be conducted. A study that addresses relational aggression in boys and
girls could provide some insight into the different types of relationally aggressive behaviors
employed by gender. This would be an important distinction for middle school educators to
make in order to effectively identify relationally aggressive behaviors among their students.
Additionally, while examining middle school students, it would be beneficial to determine how much relationally aggressive behavior is happening in schools, as opposed to out of school via technology and social media sites in order to create policies to address relational aggression accordingly.

Another area that should be studied is the reasons why youths are using aggressive behaviors towards each other. Much of the research reviewed for the present study focused on how many students were bullying others, as opposed to why they were bullying. Understanding the reasons for this behavior will assist stakeholders in developing the proper supports for students so they can get their needs met in other ways, without harming their peers.

Finally, the present study raised the question regarding when students begin using relationally aggressive behavior. In this context, investigating students in elementary and preschool would provide insight into these questions. The literature reviewed indicates that relationally aggressive behavior peaks in middle school but this behavior does not start in middle school; investigating peer aggression in the lower primary grades would add to the literature on this topic. Despite a growing body of research dedicated to the study of peer aggression, there is still much to learn.

**Personal Reflection**

School safety and the well being of students has long been an interest of mine, in both my clinical practice and my classroom. In fact, most of the clients I have treated, as well as the students I teach, have had experiences being victimized by peer aggression. The cases of students taking their own lives due to their victimization has fueled my desire to study this phenomenon and find a way to address this issue with students in order to lessen the impact so there are no drastic responses to being victimized, such as suicide. Additionally, cases such as
the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook intrigue me in that I have been curious as to the reasons why some students choose weapons to retaliate against those who victimize them and others do not. While the findings in this particular study did not show evidence of the study’s participants feeling suicidal or contemplating bringing a weapon to school, two participants in the girls focus group shared that a 15 year old girl who attended their regional high school took her own life the weekend prior to the focus group being conducted. The girls reported that this freshman did not fit in with her peer group and was often ostracized. What was amazing about this disclosure was that the girls reported it in much the same way as they would report the weather. It was a fact. No affect, no feelings, no strong opinions, just a fact. This appears to be indicative of the numbing of our youth to these tragedies. It is sad to think that this is a reality for them. But, as the participants in the girls focus group clearly said: “there is no way to stop bullying in schools”. This is their belief; something has to change.

In conducting the study, it was interesting to observe the dynamics between the girls who participated in the focus group. While the girls were all cordial to each other, there was an obvious “Queen Bee” in the group. She was the first one to speak and usually answered the focus group prompts first. Additionally, while the girls would politely disagree with each other when one expressed an opinion with which others did not agree, not one girl disagreed with anything the Queen Bee said. Body language and facial expressions of the other girls indicated that there times when the girls were having reactions to what the Queen Bee said but the girls did not speak up. As a clinical social worker who specializes in group work, I found this particular group fascinating to observe.

Not surprisingly, the findings of the study show that there is still much to learn about relational aggression. According to participants, this is not just a “mean girl” phenomenon.
While the literature states that in general, girls exhibit this behavior while boys employ physically aggressive behavior (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), it appears that boys are using relational aggression in ways that had not been observed before. Additionally, the sexualized nature with which the boys are employing these behaviors provide opportunities for further study. This is an area that is especially fascinating to me; I’m curious as to whether or not there are definitive gender differences or if this finding was specific to the participants in my study.

Originally, I had planned to examine relational aggression through the lens of the experiences of girls and their parents. I had not intended to examine educator’s perceptions. Following a discussion with my advising team, I added a third set of participants to the study: middle school educators. Had I not added educators to the study, the disconnect that became apparent among the three groups of participants would not have been so clear. This added a layer to the study that I had not anticipated and in turn, has added to my knowledge base for my work with my own students and their parents. Based on this study, I know that in my own work, I have to reach out to parents and be sure that I am following up with communication in order to minimize any possible disconnects among my students, their parents and me.

Interestingly, in thinking about recommendations for practice, something became clear to me. In my most recent special education classroom, which was a small group setting (seven students per class), I was able to create a culture in which students felt respected, valued and cared for. We started each day with a morning meeting, which allowed both students and staff to share things about themselves and in turn, created mutual respect and empathy among our community members. Students did have difficulties with their peers but it rarely happened in my classroom, most of their conflict occurred with students who were not part of my classroom. If conflict did occur among my students, we stopped the lesson and discussed the incident so there
were no unresolved issues and the class could move forward. As part of the discussion, we would identify what should have happened differently and create a plan of what would happen if the issue arose again. This could not happen in students’ regular education classrooms. There are several reasons for this, which are outlined below.

To begin, teachers are pressed to present the curriculum on a strict time line so students are ready for standardized testing. Additionally, some teachers feel that it is not their job to help students sort out peer relation issues. Further, those teachers who feel it is their job to help students with peer relation issues are not properly trained to do so. Consequently, while we are good at teaching the common core, we are not so good at teaching our students how to be good people. We do not teach things such as empathy, social skills, conflict resolution, problem solving, being a positive community member and effective listening skills. We expect our students to do and be all these things but we do not teach them the skills for mastery in these areas; there is no time during a regular school day for this type of instruction. I was fortunate enough to be able to do that in my classroom given the small size, the culture of the classroom, and the relationships I formed with my students.

In addition to my classroom of students, I was also responsible for facilitating a group of students during our anti-bullying instruction using the curriculum the district had purchased. These students were not in my class, they were students from the general population of the school. This, in my opinion, was not as effective as it could have been for a few reasons, none of which have to do with the content of the curriculum, which was considered irrelevant by my students, as well. The students came to my classroom only once every two weeks, which made it difficult to really create a “culture” in our group. The students had very different skills levels and despite my clinical abilities, there was not enough time to really give all the students what
they needed in terms of this type of instruction due to those differences. If I had the opportunity to see the students on a more consistent basis, perhaps the students would have gained more from this group.

Additionally, it seems in retrospect, had students been grouped according to need, this program could have been more successful. While schools are often proponents of an inclusion model, this needs to be looked at in presenting anti-bullying instruction. First, some students need to be taught skills so they do not bully others while some need skills to advocate for themselves so they are not victimized. In my opinion, these students should not be in a group together. It would be difficult for any of the students to get their needs met in this way. Students who did not feel that the topic of the week was relevant to them did not fully buy in to the discussion or activity that was presented. In addition to the consistency of instruction and groupings of these students, clearly, the way to address the issue of relational aggression and bullying in schools is to keep the instruction relevant so students buy in to what we are trying to teach them.

While reflecting on the findings of the study, I was surprised to discover that the majority of relational aggression incidents do not get reported to school staff. This finding has left me wondering why parents and students are not reporting victimization. Given that the girls perceived their teachers and administrators as unable to help them and parents perceive there is no follow through when incidents have been reported, it stands to reason that not reporting incidents of relational aggression to school staff is a conscious decision based on parents’ and girls’ perceptions of their teachers and administrators ability to respond appropriately. There is a missing link in the battle to combat aggressive behavior in schools and it appears to be the home-
school partnership. This is an important piece of the puzzle in creating safe schools for youths and an area in which school staff need to improve.


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Appendix A - Informed Consent - Student

Informed Consent Forms
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s):
Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, principal investigator
Tracy Turner, student researcher

Title of Project: Relational Aggression Among Middle School Girls: A Qualitative study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Focus Groups - Student
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, and you may ask this person any questions that you have. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and I have provided you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a middle school student who has the view that you have been a victim of relational aggression.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions and experiences middle school girls have in dealing with relational aggression among their friends and classmates.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group with other middle school girls and discuss your views and experiences with relational aggression. The focus group will be recorded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The focus group will be conducted at my home and will take 60-90 minutes to complete.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort. There is a possibility that you may feel uncomfortable about what we discuss if you’ve experienced this type of bullying. There will be a counselor in the focus group to help you if you need it.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the information learned in this study may help us better understand the issue of relational aggression in middle schools.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this research project. Each of you will be given a fake name to protect your identity. All data collected will be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed upon successful defense.

As the student researcher is a mandated reporter, any reports of child abuse will need to be reported to the Department of Children and Families. That means if you say that someone is hurting you, I need to report that to the Department of Children and Families.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
You have the option to choose not to participate in the study.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
I do not believe you will suffer any harm from participating in this focus group. There will be no payment for any treatment because you were part of my research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tracy Turner at turner.t@husky.neu.edu or Nena Stracuzzi, Principal Investigator at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
No.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You must be a current middle school student.

_____________________________________________  __________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date
Printed name of person above

Parent/Guardian
Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the Participant above and obtained consent
Date

Printed name of person above
Appendix B – Informed Consent – Parents

Informed Consent Forms
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s):
Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, principal investigator
Tracy Turner, student researcher

Title of Project: Relational Aggression Amongst Middle School Girls: A Qualitative study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Focus Groups - Parents
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but you may ask this person any questions that you have. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and have provided you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are the parent of a middle school girl who has had experience with relational aggression.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions and experiences parents have in dealing with relational aggression their daughters experience.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group with other parents and discuss your views and experiences with relational aggression. The focus group will be recorded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The focus group will be conducted at the researcher’s home and will take between 60-90 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the information learned in this study may help us better understand the issue of relational aggression in middle schools.
Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this research project. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. All data collected will be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed upon successful defense.
As the student researcher is a mandated reporter, any reports of child abuse will need to be reported to the Department of Children and Families.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You have the option to choose not to participate in the study.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
As there are no foreseeable risks, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tracy Turner at turner.t@husky.neu.edu or Nena Stracuzzi, Principal Investigator at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
No.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
No.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must have a daughter who is currently in middle school and who has the view that they have been a victim of relational aggression.

_____________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the
Participant above and obtained consent

______________________________________________
Printed name of person above

Date
Appendix C – Informed Consent – Educators

Informed Consent Forms
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s):
Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, principal investigator
Tracy Turner, student researcher

Title of Project: Relational Aggression Amongst Middle School Girls: A Qualitative study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Focus Groups – School Staff
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but you may ask this person any questions that you have. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and have provided you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a middle school teacher, counselor or administrator and have experience with the topic of relational aggression.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions and experiences middle school teachers, counselors and administrators have in dealing with relational aggression among their female students.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group with other middle school professionals and discuss your views and experiences with relational aggression among your female students.
The focus group will be recorded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The focus group will be conducted at the researcher’s home and will take between 60-90 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the information learned in this study may help us better understand the issue of relational aggression in middle schools.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this research project. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. All data collected will be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed upon successful defense.

As the student researcher is a mandated reporter, any reports of child abuse will need to be reported to the Department of Children and Families.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You have the option to choose not to participate in the study.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
As there are no foreseeable risks, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tracy Turner at turner.t@husky.neu.edu or Nena Stracuzzi, Principal Investigator at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
No.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
No.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be currently employed in a middle school.

__________________________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

__________________________________________________________
Date
Appendix D – Scripts

Social Media script:

As part of my EdD program at Northeastern University, I am conducting a study that will investigate bullying among middle school girls. I am looking for middle school girls, their parent(s), and middle school teachers to take part in focus groups. If you, or someone you know would like to participate, please private message me or email me at turner.t@husky.neu.edu.

Email follow up script for referrals:

Dear __________,

I was given your name by ________________ who told me you may be interested in participating in a study about bullying among middle school girls. I am an EdD student at Northeastern University and my dissertation is examining experiences that girls and their parents have with bullying and the "mean girl" phenomenon. I would love to hear more about your experience with this issue if you are willing to share with me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

~ Tracy Turner
Appendix E - Focus Group Discussion Guide

Title of Project: Relational Aggression Amongst Middle School Girls: A Qualitative study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group discussion. We are here to discuss the topic of relational aggression. That is a type of bullying that includes behaviors such as spreading rumors, purposely leaving kids out of things like parties or not letting kids sit with them during lunch, dirty looks and cyberbullying. We are discussing this because I am interested in learning more about this issue as part of a research study through Northeastern University. This focus group will run for 60-90 minutes and at the end of that time, I will go over what was discussed with you to make sure I understand. You may choose not to answer certain questions and can stop your participation in this group at any time. If you find yourself becoming upset by our discussion, there will be information about counseling services made available to you. (For the girls group: If you find yourself becoming upset by our discussion, there is a counselor here to help you and at the end of the focus group, you will information about counseling services given to you if you would like it.) 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 I need. At the end, after I have summarized what we discussed, I will give you an opportunity to make any additional comments. Are there any questions?

General Questions:

What experience do you have with relational aggression?

What have you done when you’ve been in that situation?

Have you talked to any adults about this?

In what ways have adults responded?

Follow up questions will be asked based on participants’ responses.
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: January 23, 2014
IRB #: CPS13-12-13

Principal Investigator(s):
Nena Stracuzzi
Tracy Turner

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
Relational Aggression Amongst Middle School Girls: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences and Perceptions of Girls, Parents and School Personnel

Participating Sites:
N/A

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed parent/guardian consent and child assent form
Two (2) adult signed consent forms

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JANUARY 22, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630