Relational Aggression and Middle

School Teachers' Perceptions

by

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ABSTRACT

This research project reviewed the relevant literature on relational aggression among adolescents and its connection with popularity, as well as teachers' beliefs regarding relational aggression and the aggressors and victims of this type of bullying. The research yielded findings that suggested a high prevalence rate of relational aggression among adolescents and long-term physical adjustment and emotional problems caused by being the aggressor and the victim of relational aggression. Research showed that adolescents who are well-liked by their peers are less likely to use relational aggression than adolescents who are rated as well-known or popular by their peers. Teachers appeared to have substantial influence on the presence of relational aggression in the classroom by how they reacted to incidents of aggression, whether teachers demonstrated acceptance toward aggressors or victims, and what interventions or resources were provided to aggressors and victims.

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In loving memory of Arlynn E. and Raymond H. Harms.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Children are the most important part of many people's lives. One of the worst things that a parent or guardian can experience is to witness their child's pain. Today, bullying is a far too common event that occurs in schools and it can have damaging effects on children (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Physical aggression is a form of bullying that can usually be easily and consistently identified because it involves overt behaviors such as hitting and kicking. On the other hand, relational aggression is typically more difficult to identify because many of the behaviors that are encompassed under the concept of relational aggression are covert. Some of these behaviors include rumor spreading and gossiping (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Unlike the bruising or scars that are caused by physical aggression, the emotional, social, and psychological marks left by relational aggression are harder to detect and identify. Relational aggression can also be more difficult to identify because researchers and practitioners use different definitions and names to describe relational aggression. For example, although the term relational aggression shares similar features with the terms indirect and social aggression, they are not synonymous (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Therefore, school-based practitioners may be confused about what constitutes relationally aggressive behavior.

In this paper, relational bullying will be used to describe the relationally aggressive behaviors that occur repeatedly over a period of time. Relational bullying involves an imbalance of power in which one student or a group of students bullies another student who is unable to effectively defend him/herself (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The negative behaviors that are incorporated in relational aggression can be verbal or nonverbal, exhibited directly or indirectly, and include damaging intimate and social relationships to hurt one another. These acts can include malevolent gossip, social exclusion (Nixon & Werner, 2005), and can be one in which

relational bullying occurs. Although the focus of this investigation is on relational aggression, research on both relational bullying and relational aggression are necessarily incorporated in the literature reviewed.

An alarmingly large number of children are bullied and the consequences can be quite damaging for victims. In fact, it is estimated that approximately seventy-five percent of adolescents in the United States have been bullied, either relationally or physically, at one point during their education (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The literature indicates that the effects of relational aggression are negative and hurtful to those who are both aggressors and victims (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Relational aggressors are often rejected by their peers and have poorer quality friendships than non-aggressive children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), whereas victims of relational aggression tend to have more problems with social and psychological adjustment throughout their lifetime than those who do not experience bullying (Nixon & Werner, 2005). These high rates and damaging effects of relational aggression validate the need for classroom teachers to be aware of relationally aggressive behaviors and give adequate care to victims of those behaviors.

Despite our knowledge about the effects of relational aggression, relationally aggressive behaviors are absent from most teacher and peer assessment instruments. This has resulted in the failure to identify 60% of aggressive girls and 7% of aggressive boys (Cavell, Henington, Hughes, & Thompson, 1998). Therefore, this issue cannot be ignored and interventions need to take place. Research has shown that relational aggression has severe and damaging effects on its victims. Teachers, who see students for lengthy periods of time, may be able to identify relationally aggressive behaviors more accurately than others. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to teachers' perceptions of their students' behaviors and how teachers deal with students

who demonstrate relationally aggressive behaviors and those students who are victims of those behaviors.

Research also shows an association between relational aggression and popularity among peers (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). In order to understand the relationship between relational aggression and popularity, one must first understand the differences between popularity and social acceptance. Although perceived popularity and social acceptance are very similar, they are not the same. Children who are perceived as being popular by their peers are not necessarily well-liked by their peers. Rather, they are often identified by their peers as being well-known, being in social groups with other students who are well-known, being attractive, athletic, and/or affluent (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Social acceptance or sociometric popularity is a measure of how well a student is liked by his/her peers. Social acceptance is determined by having peers nominate peers whom they most like. Social acceptance is different than perceived popularity because socially accepted students are always well-liked by their peers, but not always perceived as popular (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

The distinction between social acceptance and perceived popularity is important in order to understand children's use of relational aggression, and it may be useful in helping school-based practitioners identify which children will be the most likely to use relational aggression. For instance, research suggests that being socially accepted is associated with demonstrating positive behaviors toward others, while being perceived as popular has an increased association with both prosocial and aggressive behaviors (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Students who are perceived to be popular are more likely to behave in ways that overpower their peers in order to maintain, achieve, or demonstrate their social status. Interestingly, both physical and relational

aggression are commonly associated with the power and control strategies used by many adolescents who are perceived as popular (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Understanding the associations between popularity and relational aggression is critical because different forms of popularity (i.e., social acceptance and perceived popularity) have different implications for children's social development. Whereas children who are socially accepted tend to be well-liked and exhibit prosocial behaviors, children who are believed to be popular by peers are well-known for their materialistic possessions that others may be envious of, and they may not always behave in socially appropriate ways. Furthermore, research indicates that relationally aggressive children tend to have higher levels of perceived popularity, but not social acceptance (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Due to their perceived popularity, students who use relational aggression may avoid being identified by their victims (e.g., when a child finds out that rumors have been spread about him or her). This anonymity allows a student to maintain his/her social status while using peer relationships to hurt others (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004), as well as avoid being identified by school-based practitioners as bullies.

Middle school may be an especially vulnerable time for many students; as children move from childhood to adolescence, they show increases in their use of relational aggression. This is especially true for girls (Crick, Murray-Close, & Ostrov, 2007). Furthermore, there appears to be a corresponding increase in children's perceived popularity, but not social acceptance among children who increasingly use relational aggression among their peers (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). This raises several important questions, such as: What classroom context factors might maintain and enable this to occur? Do teachers' perceptions inadvertently effect these processes?

There is some research that suggests that classroom teachers' attitudes and perceptions of different forms of aggression, such as physical, social, and relational, can influence how students

perceive the aggressors and victims in those situations (Chang, 2003). Teachers appear to be less likely to intervene in aggressive situations in which students are socially excluding one another (Chang, 2003). This kind of "non-involvement" on the part of the teacher may be interpreted by students as tolerance for those types of behaviors and result in rejection of the victim and acceptance of the aggressor.

Statement of the Problem

There is an alarming amount of bullying and aggression occurring in schools today. The prevalence of relational aggression increases in adolescence, right around the time children enter middle school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Children who are the victims of relational aggression can suffer lasting and harmful effects. Research that suggests that teachers' attitudes and perceptions of different forms of aggression may influence students' views and acceptance of aggression, aggressors, and victims. It is hoped that the information provided by this investigation will help parents, teachers, and school-based practitioners better understand the components and attitudes that correlate with relational aggression and address the occurrence of such behaviors in schools.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the connections between middle school teachers' perceptions of relational aggression, perceived popularity, and social acceptance in the classroom and their reported reactions to aggression. Middle school teachers' perceptions were examined in four Wisconsin and one Minnesota predominantly small to average sized middle schools in the spring of the 2008-2009 school year through a paper-based survey of the teachers' responses to relationally aggressive situation.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What are middle school teachers' attitudes toward students who engage in relationally aggressive behaviors and are victims of such behaviors?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of popular and well-like children? To what extent do teachers view popular and well-liked children as relationally aggressive?

3. What is the extent that teachers' attitudes (i.e., tolerance, acceptance) about relational aggression effect their perceptions of relationally aggressive students as popular and accepted?

4. What is the extent to which empathy toward students in general, and attitudes toward relational aggression, popularity, and peer acceptance in particular, impact how teachers respond to events involving relational aggression?

Definitions of Terms

The following is a list of frequently used terms throughout the literature review that need to be explicitly understood in order to fully comprehend the included research.

Perceived popularity is the identification by peers of students who are well-known, in social groups with other students whom are well-known, attractive, athletic, and/or affluent. It is assessed by asking students to identify peers whom they view as well-known or as possessing the above traits from a given list.

Relational aggression is direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal acts that are used to damage intimate and social relationships to intentionally hurt others. These acts include malevolent gossip, social exclusion, and social isolation.

Relational bullying is any negative behavior in which an individual uses the relationship as the vehicle of harm repeatedly over a period of time, and usually involves an imbalance of

power in which one student or a group of students bullies another student who is unable to effectively defend him/herself.

Social acceptance, or sociometric popularity, is the identification by peers of how well-liked a student is by his/her peers. It is assessed by asking students to identify peers whom they like from a given list.

Assumptions and Limitations

This research project assumed that teachers would willingly participate in completing the surveys and that school principals would support the research project. A limitation of this research project was that all teachers who voluntarily participated may not have answered openly and honestly or may have answered how they thought that they should answer, not necessarily how they actually responded to relational aggression.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Large numbers of children are bullied each year, and those experiences can have long-term, negative effects in terms of children's academic, social-emotional, and physical health and development. Relational aggression is one form of bullying experienced by many children. Relational aggression can be delivered directly or indirectly through verbal or nonverbal acts that intentionally damage intimate and social relationships to hurt others (Crick, Murray-Close, & Ostrov, 2007). These acts include malevolent gossip, social exclusion, and social isolation. Teachers play an important role in our understanding, assessing, and intervening with bullying in schools. Therefore, understanding their beliefs about peer aggression and victimization, and relational forms is important for the development of effective interventions and the provision of resources for students who are both aggressors and victims in bullying situations. However, this job becomes complicated by the fact that relational aggression can be associated with seemingly positive outcomes, such as having friends and being popular. For example, although research findings are inconsistent regarding issues of dominance within relationships (i.e., the imbalance of power between aggressors and victims), relational aggression has been shown to occur in highly intimate relationships, such as between two mutual best friends, and is related to ones general acceptance and perceived popularity amongst peers. Given these associations, particular attention will be paid to the connection between children's use of relational aggression and their popularity among peers. This chapter also includes research on teachers' perceptions of aggression and the extent to which teachers' attitudes may effect how they respond to relationally aggressive events in their classrooms.

Prevalence Rates, Damaging Effects, and who uses Relational Aggression

Prevalence rates. Bullying is a problem among children. It is estimated that approximately 75% of adolescents have been victims of some form of bullying during their schooling. Furthermore, almost 30% of early adolescents experience more frequent and intense bullying in school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004).

To understand the types of bullying experienced by many adolescents, Juvonen and Nishina (2005) distributed questionnaires to sixth-grade students in Los Angeles-based schools. The students were randomly selected and were asked to rate their feelings before they were questioned about peer aggression. Research showed that 46% of students reported personally experiencing peer harassment and 42% of the students reported having witnessed peer bullying. Fifty-two percent of the total incidents reported included some form of verbal bullying such as name-calling, rumor spreading, or social exclusion. Only 23% of the incidents included some form of physical aggression (Juvonen & Nishina, 2005). These findings demonstrate the need for increased awareness, effective interventions, and resources for aggressors and victims. This large number of students who reported experiences with relational bullying cannot be ignored. Teachers need to be educated and provide help for the aggressors and victims in relational bullying incidents.

Damaging effects. The alarming occurrence of relational aggression indicated by previous studies raises great concern. The harmful effects of aggression, particularly relational aggression, have been highlighted by the media to be on the rise during recent years (Horn, 2004). Victimization by bullies is associated with numerous adjustment problems, such as ones ability to make and maintain friendships throughout a victim's lifespan (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The findings from DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) also suggested that children and

adolescents who are victims or perpetrators of relational aggression are at significant risk for experiencing social and psychological adjustment problems throughout their lifespan.

The findings from Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggested that effects of relational victimization included: headaches, stomachaches, loss of appetite, disruption in the sleep cycle, depression, and possible regression to childhood behaviors such as anxiety when meeting strangers and bed-wetting. Research also showed that a little more than 20% of children reported feeling physically sick after having experienced an episode of bullying, which included relational bullying. Raskauskas and Stoltz concluded that school personnel, nurses for example, can and should help identify what children experience after they are bullied in order to help meet the psychological needs of these students (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004).

Not only has research demonstrated that relational aggression can cause physical health and adjustment problems, but researchers have found some gender differences in children's adjustment outcomes. The findings from Loeber, McReynolds, Miller, Tiet, and Wasserman (2001), for instance, suggested that the use of relational aggression in childhood predicts social adjustment problems (e.g., a child's ability to make and maintain friendships) later on in school for girls, but not for boys. There are some studies that indicated that boys who were relationally aggressive or victimized also had adjustment difficulties. Others found that both boys and girls can be negatively effected by relationally aggressive events, but that when compared to boys, relational aggression tends to lead to more damaging effects for girls, whereas physical aggression tends to lead to more severe consequences for boys (Cavell, Henington, Hughes, & Thompson, 1998).

For some children, witnessing bullying among peers may be as harmful as experiencing it themselves. Juvonen and Nishina (2005) found that the negative effects of witnessing bullying

behaviors among children, including relational forms, included: experiencing social withdrawal, feeling lonely and depressed, and having lower self-esteem. Therefore, the findings indicate that school personnel, especially teachers, should meet the needs of both relational aggressors as well as victims.

Gender differences. The results of research conducted on prevalence rates and harmful effects of relational aggression have been far more conclusive than the findings on gender differences in the use of relational aggression. The work conducted by Juvonen and Nishina (2005) illustrated that girls reported more incidents of verbal aggression (i.e., acts that included relational aggression) and boys reported more acts of physical aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) also found evidence that relationally aggressive behaviors were more common among girls than boys. However, the findings from other researchers indicated that the relationally aggressive behaviors appeared to occur at the same rate in both males and females (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; DeHart & Stauffacher, 2006). The research thus far is inconsistent regarding gender differences in the use of relational aggression.

Despite the conflicting research as to whether boys or girls use relational aggression more, there is evidence to suggest that the use of aggression has different implications for boys and girls. Loeber et al. (2001) conducted a longitudinal study at Columbia University with 109 families. The families were selected for children who were at risk for developing antisocial behaviors according to their family history. The mothers of the families were asked to give behavioral reports on their children using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). The children who were rated ranged in age from four to 18 years. The items on the CBCL included questions related to conduct problems and were ranked from zero to two, with zero corresponding with "not true" and two associated with "very true." The conduct problems included the following

categories of antisocial behaviors: stealing, lying, physical aggression, relational aggression, impulsivity, and substance use. The results showed that boys were rated as significantly more physically aggressive than girls, but there were no significant gender differences in the occurrence of stealing, lying, substance use, or relational aggression. Interestingly, even though conduct problems were rated more frequent in boys, conduct problems were reported to be more pervasive in girls. This means that although conduct problems may be identified more often in boys, for girls who displayed conduct problems, these behaviors were more all-encompassing, invasive, and persistent. Even though boys and girls may not differ in their use of relational aggression, relational aggression may play a different role in children's expression of conduct disorder. Given the significant problems associated with relationally aggressive behaviors for boys and girls, it is important that teachers are aware of the effects of this type of aggression on each gender.

Being able to identify. Given that the use of relational aggression can have such profound and damaging effects on aggressors and victims, and that it occurs too frequently, it is important for adults and students to be able to identify relational aggression accurately. Unfortunately, victims of bullying are not always easily identified, and sometimes these students were too embarrassed to tell adults about their experiences (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Therefore, it is important for school-based practitioners, specifically teachers, who spend the most time with students, to be able to accurately identify relational aggressors and victims. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggested that school nurses may be likely to be the most accurate at identifying students who are bullied. Specifically, Raskauskas and Stoltz proposed that school nurses would be in the best position to recognize victims of relational aggression. School nurses may be the first to identify some of the warning signs of relational aggression such as increased absences

from school. To examine the extent to which students realized that they are victims of relational aggression, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) conducted a pilot study. A survey was given to 116 eighth-grade girls. The surveys contained four vignettes which portrayed instances of social exclusion, rumor spreading, gossiping, and other forms of relational aggression. The students then indicated whether the girl in the vignette was or was not a relational bully. The results showed there was confusion among the girls as to which forms of relational aggression they considered to be bullying. More than 80% of the girls did not believe that social exclusion was a form of bullying. However, almost 95% of the participants believed that rumor spreading and gossip were forms of bullying and had long-lasting negative effects on self-esteem and reputation. The study by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggested that relational aggression can be confusing and undetectable to students. If students have difficulties identifying relational aggression, then the adults who interact with students may also have the same difficulties.

Although students may be confused about identifying behaviors that are relationally aggressive, teachers can and should be helpful in that process (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Although Cullerton-Sen and Crick included only elementary teachers based on the argument that middle and high school teachers may not have enough opportunity to see the behaviors of their students, very little empirical research is available to support such conclusions. Therefore, understanding the role that teachers in middle and high school play in the identification process of relationally aggressive behaviors remains unclear.

Relational Aggression, Links to Development, and Peer Relationships.

During adolescence, peers become increasingly important to youth. As a result, adolescents may engage in behaviors that help them establish and maintain friendships. However, the means children use to maintain friendships may not always be positive. In fact,

some studies suggested that children use relational aggression as a means to control their friendships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). This results in different types of relationships, such as being involved in highly controlling friendships that foster negative or harmful behaviors. In order to have the ability to use relational aggression in friendships, children may need to master these behaviors first in childhood.

Before it is possible to understand why adolescents use relational aggression, it is important to learn how children develop the skills necessary to utilize relational aggression. Evidence suggests that children may practice using many different skills, such as bullying, within the family context before they use them with peers. DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) suggested that children often practiced using and developing relationally aggressive techniques in sibling relationships before they applied it to their peers in a social context. In order to explore the developmental changes in children and the use of relational aggression, DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) conducted a longitudinal study with 63 middle to upper-class families in New York. They videotaped the children of these families playing together once per week and then they videotaped one of the siblings playing with a friend. The videotaped play sessions were then reviewed and the interactions were recorded as either falling into a cooperative or relationally aggressive category. DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) found that children's use of relational aggression changed with age and with the type of playing partner. The results showed that during early childhood, children rarely used relational aggression with their friends, but displayed high levels of this form of aggression with their siblings. However, as children developed into middle childhood, their skill in using relational aggression grew and they increasingly portrayed this type of aggression with their friends.

Findings on children's increased use of relational aggression amongst peers have been demonstrated elsewhere. For example, some researchers have found that during middle childhood, children's reliance on relationally manipulative behaviors increased over the school year (Crick, Murray-Close, & Ostrov, 2007). Furthermore, unlike children's use of physical aggression, children's use of relational aggression appeared to continue to increase from middle childhood into adolescence (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

In order to help teachers and school-based practitioners accurately identify relational aggression, it may be helpful to understand why this form of aggression is appealing to adolescent children. The advantage of using relational aggression, as opposed to other forms, is that it may allow the adolescents who use it to keep out of trouble and maintain their social relationships (Nixon & Werner, 2005). Compared to physical aggression, relational aggression can be delivered indirectly, such as through spreading rumors over instant messaging to the target's friends, but not the target. Therefore, the use of relational aggression may allow adolescents to gain power over or hurt a peer while avoiding getting immediately caught or damaging their social reputation.

Holding beliefs that aggression is an acceptable response to others' behaviors may also lead to adolescents' continued use of aggressive behavior. Indeed, researchers have found that children's beliefs about aggression and the manner in which they processed social information predicted their aggressive behavior as rated by themselves, their peers, and their teachers (Nixon & Werner, 2005). The authors suggested that when children personally believed that aggression was acceptable, they were more likely to interpret ambiguous behaviors from others as hostile and negative, and respond in an aggressive manner. This process of negatively interpreting incoming information from others as hostile was referred to as deviant social information

processing. Nixon and Werner (2005) examined the relationship between such beliefs and relational aggression in adolescents. To do this, they assessed adolescents' beliefs about the acceptability of, as well as their own use of relational aggression among 122 seventh and eighth-grade girls in the northeastern region of the United States. The results showed that students who viewed relational aggression as acceptable reported themselves as using relational aggression more frequently than those who did not believe that the use of relational aggression was acceptable.

Taken together, relational aggression has been shown to escalate during adolescence, a time in which peer status, peer approval, and a sense of belonging become increasingly important issues for children at that age (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Relational Aggression and Popularity

Although the literature yields some contradictory evidence regarding a gender-dominant use of relational aggression, there does seem to be an increased use of relational aggression by adolescent girls. The findings from Nixon and Werner (2005) and Talbott (1997) indicated that girls showed an increased use of relational aggression during adolescence, whereas boys did not exhibit this pattern. In fact, by seventh grade, the early stages of adolescence, there was almost a disappearance of physical aggression in girls (Talbott, 1997). One possible explanation for adolescent girls' increase in the use of relational aggression is that, compared to boys, they may be motivated to obtain peer acceptance and approval within their social relationships. Thus, girls may use relational aggression as a means of making greater social connections with others and thereby attempt to meet their needs for intimacy and closeness (Rose & Rudolf, 2006).

Closely related to adolescent girls' desire to gain and maintain peer acceptance is the importance of social networks (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Researchers have recently

explored the relationship between relational aggression and popularity. The findings from Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) indicated that some aggressive youths were viewed as popular by their peers. Perceived popularity was defined as being well-known by peers, viewed as attractive, and having monetary possessions that were desired by peers (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). A total of 607 third through ninth graders were asked to nominate peers who they felt were popular. The results showed that seventh and ninth-grade girls and boys who used both relational and physical aggression were more frequently nominated by their peers as being popular. These findings suggest that adolescents may behave in ways that intentionally hurt peers in order to gain control of them and attain or maintain their perceived popularity. Furthermore, Rose and colleagues also found that students who used relational aggression were more likely to remain unidentified by adults as being a bully, but that their social reputation increased (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Overt or physical aggression did not have the same associations with popularity as did relational aggression. Unlike the use of relational aggression, physical aggression tended to harm ones social status overtime. Based on their study, Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) argued that in order for the use of relational aggression to positively effect peer relations, adolescent aggressors had to use emotional control and have a deep understanding of social relationships. However, only the use of relational aggression also predicted an *increase* in perceived popularity throughout late adolescent schooling.

In order to gain a further understanding about the relation between relational aggression and popularity in adolescence, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) studied 905 children in fifth through ninth grades from northeastern cities. The students all completed sociometric assessments of their peers. The questions for the sociometric assessment asked students to indicate who they liked the most and who they liked the least. In this study, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004)

discriminated between social acceptance and perceived popularity. Social acceptance (or sociometric popularity) was assessed by adding the peer nominations a student received on the most and least liked questions. This provided an overall indication of how well liked a student was. Perceived popularity, on the other hand, did not always indicate how well liked a child was, but how well known that person was. Findings indicated that socially accepted children were characterized as being kind, trustworthy, cooperative, and displayed positive social skills (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). However, students who were perceived as being highly popular were viewed as dominant, arrogant, and physically and relationally aggressive. In summary, socially accepted students tended to behave in prosocial ways, whereas perceived popular students tended to behave antisocially.

Unfortunately, children who were perceived as being popular were the most influential and well-known throughout their grade, not the students who were socially accepted. Furthermore, the findings from Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) also suggested that physical and relational aggression were linked with perceived popularity, and these behaviors were related to some form of dominance and manipulation. In other words, students who had the ability to control their social relationships, even in antisocial ways, were able to maintain the top position in their social group. The results also indicated that perceived popularity was more stable than social acceptance and that perceived popularity was more stable among girls than boys. In addition, relational aggression was consistently predictive of perceived popularity, especially for girls, but not predictive of social acceptance. Based on this work, it seems that adolescents tend to accept aggressive behaviors in peers who have high social status, which in turn, may reinforce the antisocial behaviors of those who are perceived as being popular.

Researchers have since examined the relationship between perceived popularity and social acceptance, aggression, and performance in school (Gorman, McKay, Nakamoto, & Schwartz 2006). Gorman et al. (2006) studied 342 adolescents from Los Angeles. The popularity and social acceptance of these students was assessed through peer ratings. The peer ratings included questions that asked students how popular their peers were on a scale that ranged from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very popular"). The results showed that adolescents who displayed high levels of physical aggression and relationally manipulative behaviors, and had high ratings in popularity, showed a decline in their grade point averages (GPA) and an increase in unexplained absences from school. Students who showed low levels of aggression, physical and manipulative behaviors, did not show the same correlation between popularity, increased absences from school, and a decline in GPA. Students who ranked high in social acceptance (i.e., well-liked) were characterized as being high achieving. The authors suggested that being socially accepted by peers in adolescence increased a student's motivation and interest in school. Socially accepted students were classified as being friendly, responsible, and skilled in the social domain. However, perceived popularity among adolescents was not clearly related to the positive academic characteristics that social acceptance was. Perceived popularity was associated with both prosocial *and* aggressive behaviors. Based on these findings, Gorman et al. (2006) concluded that the effects of being perceived as popular and being socially accepted were not the same. Popularity had risks associated with it such as an increase in relational and overt aggression, risky behaviors during adolescence, alcohol use, and academic difficulties. These findings replicated those of other studies which have also shown that students who were reported to be highly aggressive and rated as popular by their peers did not achieve as highly as their non-aggressive peers. These findings are particularly important for school-based practitioners in

terms of intervening with these aggressive behaviors in schools. Teachers, school psychologists, and other school personnel must be aware of the devastating effects that aggressive behaviors and perceived peer popularity can have on aggressors' academic achievement, as well as effects on victims.

Social Acceptance, Perceived Popularity, Relational Aggression, and Congruence of Peer and Teacher Nominations

Given the negative behaviors and adjustment difficulties that are associated with student popularity, consensus regarding popularity rankings among students and teachers has been examined. Malloy and Yarlas (1996) compared the agreement amongst and degree of accuracy between children's and teachers' perceptions of other students. Participants were used from the Henry Barnard Laboratory School on the campus of Rhode Island College over a three-year period. The children were in grades first through sixth. Children and teachers rated classmates/students on eight dimensions, one of which was popularity. Results showed that children were accurate perceivers of their classmates' popularity. In addition, children and teachers showed high levels of agreement on perceptions of observable behaviors, cognitive ability, popularity, and general mood.

In addition to studying the levels of agreement among students and teachers on dimensions of peer acceptance and popularity, researchers have also examined the extent to which teachers and students were congruent in their identification of relational aggression and victimization. Cullerton-Sen and Crick (2005) found that elementary school teachers' reports of children's relational victimization was more closely related to peers' reports, but not closely related to children's self-reports of relational victimization. Furthermore, although teachers and students appeared more congruent in their views of relational victimization than the victims

themselves, teacher and students reports were only moderately correlated, indicating that their views were not exactly identical.

Relational bullies and victims were also analyzed in a study by Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, and Power (1999). Findings showed that teachers' perceptions of aggression in elementary school were better aligned with actual bullying behaviors than in middle school. Consistent with the arguments posed by Cullerton-Sen and Crick (2005), the results suggested that elementary teachers may be able to more accurately identify bullies and victims because they spend the majority of the school day with one group of students. In addition, the findings from Leff et al. (1999) showed that reports by multiple teachers increased the accuracy with which teachers' were able to identify bullies. Given that numerous studies showed the difficulties that teachers can have in accurately identifying students who use relationally aggressive behaviors, especially as students reach adolescence, it is important to gain further understanding for how teachers perceive aggressive behaviors and the attributes that they associate with those behaviors.

Attributes of Classrooms and Teachers and Relational Aggression

Teachers and students appear to be able to agree on the identification of bullies and victims in the classroom up to the middle schools years, a time at which relational aggression increases in prevalence. Attention should be given to the possible environmental characteristics unique to the school setting that may account for the change in perception and identification of bullies and victims during middle childhood, since numerous bullying prevention programs contain a classroom component. For example, the "Friend to Friend" model is a school-based intervention program that may be the best intervention program for targeting relationally aggressive girls. The "Friend to Friend" model addresses factors that have been shown to

contribute to relational aggression the most, that is, the hostile attribution bias displayed by many aggressive children. This intervention program contains a classroom-wide component that is used to increase the awareness of relational aggression and create a school-wide climate that promotes prosocial behaviors and relationships (Leff, Goldstein, Angelucci, Cardaciotto, & Grossman, 2007).

The research on teacher and classroom characteristics that may contribute to relational aggression is not clear. There is some research on teachers' reactions to relational aggression that suggests that relational aggression may be inadvertently reinforced in the classroom. For example, Yoon and Kerber (2003) studied teachers' reactions to bullying behaviors. Bullying included physical, verbal, and social exclusion. Relational aggression was used as the broader term for social exclusion, since it included gossiping, exclusion, and threatening to end a friendship unless a friend complied with a request. Participants included 94 graduate-level teachers in an urban university in the Midwest. Teachers were given the Bullying Attitude Questionnaire, which was modified and used to assess teachers' perceived perceptions of the seriousness of bullying, the type of intervention that they would chose to implement, and their levels of empathy toward victims. Results showed that teachers were less likely to take social exclusion seriously and intervene in those situations compared to incidents involving verbal and physical bullying. Since teachers rated themselves as being less likely to intervene in social exclusion situations, they also conveyed less empathy toward victims of this type of aggression when compared to other forms. This lack of action by the teacher to help may be perceived as uncaring by the student victim. These results are alarming given the high prevalence of relational aggression and the long-term, negative impact of being the victim and aggressor of this type of bullying.

Teachers' attitudes toward aggressive and withdrawn behaviors and the effects of those reactions were also studied by Chang (2003). Students from a junior high school (seventh, eighth, and ninth grades) in a city in China participated in this study which used peer nominations to measure peers with prosocial leadership skills, withdrawn behaviors, and peer acceptance. Teacher warmth (e.g., how supportive and caring a teacher was viewed) and attitudes toward aggression (e.g., tolerance or acceptance of different types of aggression) were also measured. Social withdrawal and aggressive behaviors were found to be moderately influenced by teachers' attitudes, meaning that between 10% and 30% of children's withdrawal and aggression were explained by teachers' attitudes. Teacher warmth had the broadest and most positive effect on increasing peer's acceptance of withdrawn and aggressive students. Conversely, in classrooms where teachers demonstrated aversion to aggression, aggression was positively correlated with peer rejection. Overall, findings suggested that students are influenced by their teachers' attitudes and behaviors. Findings suggested that aggressive children have positive self-perceptions about their social skills in classes with teachers who convey negative attention to the students' behavior. Withdrawn students, on the other hand, felt more positive about their social competence in classes with teachers who were empathetic toward them. These findings appear to show a strong effect that teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward aggression can have on how students' behave, how accepting they are of their peers, and how they form their own self-perceptions.

Summary and Purpose of this Investigation

Accumulating evidence suggests that relational aggression is a problem among youth. Adolescents appear to be greatly effected by this form of aggression, in part, because of their increased concern with their social status. Using relational aggression with peers appears to

allow children to have power over and manipulate their peers, as well as maintain their popularity and stay out of trouble. For adolescents, being popular versus being well-liked or accepted by peers have different implications for their social adjustment. Those who are accepted by their peers tend to be prosocial and attain greater success in school, whereas those who are considered by their peers to be popular tend to exhibit both positive, as well as negative behaviors. The degree to which students rate one another as popular or well-liked appears to be at least partially influenced by classroom teachers' attitudes and empathy toward varying types of aggression and victims of aggression. Given the findings by Leff and colleagues (1999), which suggested that middle school teachers were less accurate in their ability to identify relational aggression than their elementary teacher counterparts, as well as the dearth of information about middle school teacher in general, more research is needed to better understand the complexities associated with teachers' perceptions of and attitudes toward children's experiences with relational aggression, popularity and acceptance among peers, and their responses to these behaviors.

The purpose of this study was three fold. The first goal of this study was to assess teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards relational aggression. The second goal of this investigation was to determine if these attitudes influenced the extent to which teachers' felt relationally aggressive children were either popular or accepted. It is hoped that such information may shed light on why students' levels of acceptance (see for example, Chang, 2003) might be influenced by their teachers. The final goal of this study was to understand how middle school teachers felt about relational aggression and what they currently do to support aggressors and victims. It was believed that teachers' attitudes would impact how they report responding to

relational aggression and victimization; however, given the scarceness of research in this area, no specific hypotheses were made.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Design

In order to examine teachers' perceptions about relational aggression, views regarding the estimated prevalence rates, gender differences, and characteristics associated with victims and aggressors, as well as teachers' general reactions toward bullying-related incidents, a paper-based survey was developed and disseminated to five schools in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Prior to the implementation of this survey, it was examined and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Involved in Research and by the principals of each of the schools at which the surveys were completed. This chapter outlines the methods used to conduct this study, including participant information and procedures of implementation.

Subjects and Procedures

All classroom teachers within the following five rural, medium-sized middle schools were invited to participate in this survey (see Appendix A for the introductory and assent letter): Adams-Friendship Middle School (Adams-Friendship, WI), Viking Middle School (Baldwin, WI), Berlin Middle School (Berlin, WI), Oakfield Middle School (Oakfield, WI), and Crosswinds Middle School (Woodbury, MN). All participating teachers taught at the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels. A total of 100 middle school teachers from a combination of all of the middle schools participated in this research study by completing the survey. The 100 participants who completed surveys reflected 54% of all middle school teachers at each of the five schools who were given surveys. All of the teachers who were given surveys included teachers who taught content courses, as well as specialist and elective courses. Of the total number of respondents, 60 were female and 40 of the respondents were male. The average

number of years of teaching experience for those teachers who participated was 14.6 years (*SD* = 9.37 years, ranged from 2 to 38 years).

Based on the 2007-2008 academic year statistics, minority students represented between 0.9% - 47% of the student body (see Table 1). Ethnicity included American Indian, Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Hmong. Of the schools selected, between 5.4% - 59% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunches (refer to Table 1).

Table 1.

School Demographics.

Schools	Total Number of Teachers	# Teachers that Participated	# of Students in School	% Free/ Reduced Lunch	% ESL
Viking Middle School (Baldwin, WI)	51	25	469	18.3%	4.2% (Hispanic, Hmong)
Crosswinds Middle School (Woodbury, MN)	27	15	860	39%	47% (American Indian, Asian, African American, Hispanic)
Oakfield Middle School (Oakfield, WI)	18	18	129	5.4%	0.9% (Hispanic)
Berlin Middle School (Berlin, WI)	47	23	381	33.1%	3.2% (Hispanic, Hmong)
Adams-Friendship Middle School (Adams, WI)	41	19	420	59%	8.3% (American Indian, Asian, African American, Hispanic)

Approval for this study (i.e., to ask teachers to participate) was gained by means of contacting the principals of each of the middle schools. Once principals agreed to allow this researcher into their schools, a letter of introduction describing the purpose of the study and an

invitation of participation was placed in the mailbox of all licensed and classified middle school teachers in each of the five middle schools. Confidentiality was stressed in order to encourage higher honesty in the self-report process. An informed consent disclosure notice was presented immediately preceding the actual survey (see Appendix A).

Recipients placed completed surveys in their school's main office in a sealed manila folder in such a manner that did not allow the evaluator to know who did or did not choose to participate. Personnel were given two to three weeks to complete their questionnaire. Two to three weeks after the initial distribution of the survey, the researcher collected the manila folders from all five of the middle schools' main offices. No follow-up surveys were distributed to any participants.

Instrumentation

Teachers completed a paper-based survey designed to assess their perceptions and practices related to relational aggression, including tried interventions, and their empathy toward victims and aggressors of aggression (see Appendix B for survey items). Demographic data, including teachers' age, gender, and years of experience within education, were gathered. In addition, teachers were asked to identify the percentage of students that they believed they could accurately and honestly answer the questions about, the extent to which they believed that relationally aggressive behaviors occurred in their school, and their beliefs about which gender, males or females, was most likely to be involved in incidents involving relational aggression.

Finally, 10 items, each including a range of several sub-questions, were included to obtain the following information from participating teachers. Teachers were asked to indicate their responses using a five-point Likert scale (1= never, 2= once in awhile, 3 = some of the time,

4= very often, 5= always). Sub-questions comprising each item number (e.g., a, b, c, and d of item 2) were combined and then averaged across the entire sample to yield a total score for that item. The internal consistency reliabilities were then examined. Where there was a poor fit, or alphas below the practice standard of .70, sub-questions were deleted from the item until acceptable levels of internal consistency were reached. In some cases, alphas for items that fell below .70 were accepted if a) they were not lower than .60 (generally acceptable levels for research) *and* b) combining the sub-questions to form an average score made conceptual sense based on current research.

Empathy toward students. Teachers were asked to rate how often they generally felt empathetic and caring toward their students (3 questions, e.g., "How often do you care about, listen to, like, and respect the opinions of your students?").

Attitudes and tolerance for relational aggression. All teachers were asked to respond to how often they tolerated students who exhibited relationally aggressive behaviors (4 questions, e.g., "I think these behaviors are normal for middle school students"). In addition, respondents were asked how they felt toward the victims of relational aggression and the support they offered (4 questions, e.g., "I feel sympathetic toward them").

In order to assess teachers' general attitudes towards those who engaged in relational aggression and teachers' levels of tolerance for those behaviors in general, four of the sub-questions on item 2 (a, c, d, and e) were combined and averaged to yield a total "tolerance for aggression" score. Higher scores indicated greater tolerance for or acceptability of relationally aggressive behaviors. To assess teachers' attitudes or empathy towards victims of relational aggression, four sub-questions on item 3 (a, c, d, and e) were combined and then averaged to yield a total "attitudes toward victim" score. Higher scores indicated greater levels of empathy

and support for the victims. Alphas for the tolerance of relational aggression and attitude toward victims scores were in acceptable ranges, $\alpha = .63$ and .78, respectfully.

Teachers' views of well-liked children. In order to understand teacher's beliefs about the extent to which they viewed well-liked children as being well-adjusted or relationally aggressive, all personnel were asked to answer how often they perceived their students who were well-liked to demonstrate prosocial behaviors or academic success and how often they demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors. Sub-questions on item 4 were combined and averaged to yield a total "well-adjusted" score (sub-questions a, c, and e) and a "relationally aggressive" score (sub-questions b, d, and f). Higher scores on these subscales indicated teachers' general beliefs that well-liked children also tended to be well-adjusted and/or relationally aggressive. Reliabilities for these scores were in acceptable ranges, $\alpha = .68$ for well-adjusted and $\alpha = .85$ for relationally aggressive.

Teachers' views of popular children. To assess teachers' perceptions about the extent to which they viewed popular children as being well-adjusted or relationally aggressive, all personnel were asked to answer how often they perceived their students who were popular to demonstrate prosocial behaviors and academic success and how often those students demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors. Sub-questions on item 5 were combined and averaged to yield a total "well-adjusted" score (sub-questions a, c, and e) and a "relationally aggressive" score (sub-questions b, d, and f). Higher scores on theses subscales indicated teachers' general beliefs that popular children also tended to be well-adjusted and/or relationally aggressive. Reliabilities for these scores were in acceptable ranges, $\alpha = .72$ for well-adjusted and $\alpha = .84$ for relationally aggressive.

Teachers' responses to relationally aggressive student behaviors. In order to understand teachers' responses to relational aggression, and the factors that affect their response, teachers were asked to rate how often they used different methods to respond to students who exhibited relationally aggressive behaviors (see Appendix B, item 6). Items asked teachers about the extent to which they tell students' parents about the incidents, involve school service providers, ask students to resolve their problems with peers on their own, ask the relationally aggressive student to apologize to the victim, or offer help to the relationally aggressive student in making amends with the victim.

Teachers' responses to students who are victims of relationally aggressive behaviors. To assess teachers' responses to students who are victims of relational aggression and the factors that affect teachers' responses, participants were asked to rate how often they used different methods to respond to students who were victims of relationally aggressive behaviors (see Appendix B, item 7). Items asked teachers about the extent to which they tell students' parents about the incidents, involve school service providers, ask students to resolve their problems with their peers on their own, ask the relationally aggressive student to apologize to the victim, or offer help to the relationally aggressive student in making amends with the victim.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 14.0 was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, means, standard deviations, as well as correlations will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions about relational aggression, their current intervention practices, levels of empathy for the victims and aggressors in incidents involving relational aggression, and teacher's beliefs about the characteristics associated with students who are viewed as popular and as well-liked. Findings will first be discussed with respect to teachers' familiarity with their students, as well as their knowledge about the prevalence of relational aggression among their student body. Following this discussion, the results related to each specific question posed by this researcher will be presented.

Middle school teachers were asked to estimate the percentage of their students about whom they thought that they could accurately and fairly answer the research questions. Their responses indicated that the teachers generally believed that they could accurately answer the survey questions for most of their students ($M = 68\%$, $SD = 23.5\%$). Teachers also reported that they heard about students demonstrating relationally aggressive behaviors at least once per month to once per week ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.88$). Finally, teachers perceived girls to be involved in relational aggression 97.9% of the time, while they viewed boys as being involved in relational aggression only 2.1% of the time.

Research Question #1: What are middle school teachers' attitudes toward students who engage in relationally aggressive behaviors and are victims of such behaviors?

To answer this question, teachers were asked a series of questions about their attitude and tolerance toward students who exhibited relationally aggressive behaviors and students who were victims of such behaviors, using five point Likert scale ("never to always").

Findings indicated that, for the most part, teachers felt that relationally aggressive behaviors, such as spreading rumors or excluding students from social gathering, were not tolerated in their classroom ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.43$). Most teachers indicated that they often felt sympathetic and supportive toward the victims of relational aggression ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.51$).

Research Question #2: What are teachers' perceptions of popular and well-liked children? To what extent do teachers view popular and well-liked children as relationally aggressive?

Teachers' perceptions of students who are well-liked. Teachers generally responded that their students who appeared to be well-liked by their peers demonstrated prosocial behaviors, such as being leaders in class, succeeding academically, and having a large peer group ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.47$). Findings also indicated that teachers tended to believe that well-liked students did not typically demonstrate relationally aggressive behaviors such as spreading rumors about their peers, excluding their peers from social gatherings, and threatening to take away their friendships from their peers ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.71$).

Teachers' perceptions of students who are popular. The teachers generally responded that their students who appeared to be viewed as popular by their peers demonstrated well adjusted behaviors, such as being leaders in class, succeeding academically, and having a large peer group, slightly more than some of the time ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.54$). Teachers were also asked to respond how often they thought students who seemed to be viewed as popular by their peers demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors, such as spreading rumors about their peers, excluding their peers from social gatherings, and threatening to take away their friendships from their peers. The teachers tended to respond that popular students exhibited relationally aggressive behaviors some of the time ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.70$).

Research Question #3: Do teachers' attitudes (i.e., tolerance, acceptance) about relational aggression affect their perceptions of relationally aggressive students as popular and accepted?

To answer this question, a series of correlations were computed and examined to determine the associations between teachers' attitudes toward relational aggression and their beliefs about popular and accepted children. Responses from the teachers appeared to indicate that teachers' tolerance or acceptance toward students who demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors did not effect the extent to which they viewed well-liked and popular students as well-adjusted or relationally aggressive (see Appendix C).

Teachers who viewed popular students as those who also demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors tended to view children who are well-liked as relationally aggressive (r = 0.65, p <0.00). In addition, teachers who generally believed their popular students demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors tended to view those same students as demonstrating less prosocial behaviors (r = -0.30, p <0.00).

When teachers viewed well-liked students as well-adjusted or as demonstrating prosocial behaviors, they also tended to perceive popular students as demonstrating prosocial behaviors (r =*0.61*, p <.00). Based on these findings, it appears that teachers were not differentiating between well-liked students and popular students at a significant level when they were asked to address questions related to their perceptions of relational aggression and adjustment.

Research Question #4: To what extent does empathy toward students in general and attitudes toward relational aggression, popularity, and peer acceptance in particular, impact how teachers respond to events involving relational aggression?

Teachers' responses to item numbers six and seven were first examined to explore general trends in how teachers reported responding when students relationally aggressed against

others (i.e., item number 6) or are victims of relational aggression (i.e., item number 7). The frequencies and percentages of teachers who reported responding to these events in various ways were listed in Tables 2 and 3. Overall, teachers reported that they responded in a number of ways in relational aggression incidents with students, by telling students' parents, telling school service providers, asking students to talk out their problems, asking students to apologize to one another, or by offering to help as the adult. Teachers reported intervening to relationally aggressive 27%-47% of the time. This broad range of responses, without the identification of one main response by teachers, may indicate that teachers use a number of strategies to attempt to deal with relationally aggressive situations. Also, these findings may reveal that teachers were unfamiliar with strategic responses that have been shown by research to be the most effective for dealing with relationally aggressive incidents (e.g., helping students accurately interpret social cues/decrease students' hostile attribution biases). The results may also indicate that teachers have difficulties differentiating between relationally aggressive aggressors and victims, and the different implications for helping students in those situations.

Table 2.

Frequency (Percent) of Teachers Who Respond to Relational Aggression using Various Strategies.

	Response Option				
Strategy	Never	Once in Awhile	Some of the Time	Very Often	Often
Tell Students' Parents	9	43	38	9	1
Tell Service Provider	14	0	34	43	8
Tell Student to Talk it Out	2	14	38	38	8
Tell Student to Apologize	6	21	35	32	5
Offer to Help	3	18	32	39	8

Table 3.

Frequency and Percentage of Teachers Who Respond to Relational Aggression Victims using Various Strategies.

	Response Option				
Strategy	Never	Once in Awhile	Some of the Time	Very Often	Often
Tell Students' Parents	12	43	27	18	0
Tell Service Provider	1	13	27	47	11
Tell Student to Talk it Out	3	27	39	25	6
Tell Students to Walk Away	0	8	43	41	7
Tell Students to Talk to Someone Else	1	12	33	41	13
Tell Student to Apologize	21	30	32	13	2
Offer to Help	2	21	32	37	8

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the major findings and their implications. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the connections between teachers' perceptions of relational aggression, characteristics of aggressors and victims, and how teachers responded to incidents involving aggression based on their perceptions, in 5 small to medium sized middle schools in the Midwest. Among the 5 middle schools, 100 of the 184 total sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers participated in completing the survey. The survey consisted of 10 questions, most consisting of multiple sub-questions.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question focused on teachers' tolerance of relationally aggressive behaviors, as well as teachers' empathy toward students who were victims of those behaviors. Based on the findings, teachers reported that they felt that students' relationally aggressive behaviors, such as spreading rumors about peers or excluding students from social gatherings, were not tolerated in the classroom. Teachers also indicated that they often felt sympathetic and supportive toward the victims of relational aggression.

These findings appear to offer positive news and support the implications of Chang's (2003) study. Chang concluded that teacher warmth had the broadest and most positive effect on increasing peer's acceptance of withdrawn students. Also, Chang found that students appeared to be greatly influenced by their teacher's attitudes and behaviors. Withdrawn students tended to

feel more positive about their social competence with teachers who were empathetic toward them. Therefore, given that the teachers in this study reported that they felt empathetic and supportive toward the victims of relational aggression in their classrooms, it is possible that many victims of relational aggression would be accepted by their peers and given positive support, at least those in classrooms where teachers are empathetic towards them.

The second research question centered on differentiating between teachers' perceptions of students who they viewed as well-liked and popular, and determining if teachers perceived either group of those students as demonstrating prosocial or relationally aggressive behaviors. Teachers generally responded that their students who appeared to be well-liked and popular by their peers also demonstrated prosocial behaviors such as being leaders in class, succeeding academically, and having a large peer group. Findings also indicated that teachers tended to believe that well-liked and popular students tended not to demonstrate relationally aggressive behaviors such as spreading rumors about their peers, excluding their peers from social gatherings, and threatening to take away their friendships from their peers.

These findings appear to be inconsistent with the literature (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) in terms of characteristics that have been shown to be associated with accepted versus popular students. Cillessen and Mayeux showed that socially accepted adolescents appeared to be kind, trustworthy, cooperative, and have positive social skills. Perceived popular students, on the other hand, appeared to demonstrate dominant, arrogant, and physically and relationally aggressive behaviors.

Interestingly, the teachers in this study did not appear to distinguish between prosocial behaviors of socially accepted students and relationally aggressive behaviors of popular students.

However, the findings from Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) found that students who used relational aggression were more likely to remain unidentified by adults. Therefore, it may be possible that the teachers who responded were unable to distinguish between prosocial and aggressive behaviors associated between accepted and popular students because the teachers were not able to identify which of their students were truly accepted or perceived as popular by their peers.

The third research question addressed teachers' tolerance of relationally aggressive behaviors and how those views affected their perceptions of students who were popular and well-liked. Responses from the teachers indicated that teachers' tolerance or acceptance toward students who demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors did not affect the extent to which they viewed well-liked and popular students as being well-adjusted or relationally aggressive. Teachers who viewed popular students as those who also demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors also tended to view children who were well-liked as relationally aggressive. In other words, it appears that teachers did not perceive relationally aggressive behaviors as being mainly a characteristic of well-liked or popular students. However, an important definition emerged. Teachers who generally believed their popular students demonstrated relationally aggressive behaviors tended to view those same students as demonstrating less prosocial behaviors. When teachers viewed well-liked students as well-adjusted or as demonstrating prosocial behaviors, they also tended to perceive popular students as demonstrating prosocial behaviors. Based on these findings, it appears that for the most part, teachers tended not to differentiate between well-liked students and popular students when asked about their perceptions of relational aggression and adjustment. Despite teachers seeing popular and well-liked children in similar ways,

teachers' perceptions of popular and well-liked students as aggressive were associated with fewer prosocial behaviors.

While the results indicated that teachers did not report a tolerance of aggression, which may have positive classroom implications (Chang, 2003), the fact that teachers reported being unable to associate prosocial and aggressive characteristics to students who were viewed as popular or accepted may complicate teachers' reported tolerance of aggression. Even though teachers reported that they felt that aggression was not acceptable, their responses of being unable to discriminate between different groups of students (i.e., those students who are well-liked versus those who are popular) may imply that their students are also confused about their teachers' views of aggression. For example, students may experience ambivalence about relational aggression because they sense their teachers' tolerance for popular children who tend to exhibit relational aggression. Therefore, students may also feel confusion regarding acceptable social behaviors in the classroom.

The last research question sought to determine the extent to which teachers' empathy toward students in general, and views regarding relational aggression, popularity, and peer acceptance in particular, affected how teachers' responded to relationally aggressive incidents. The findings indicated that teachers' general tolerance or acceptance toward students who demonstrate relationally aggressive behaviors did not affect the extent to which they viewed well-liked and popular students as well-adjusted or relationally aggressive.

Other pertinent findings gleaned from this research indicated that teachers reported hearing about relationally aggressive incidents at least once per month to once per week. Although this reported prevalence rate is alarming, it is actually less than statistical averages reported in some research. For example, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) reported that

approximately 75% of adolescents were victims of bullying incidents and almost 30% of adolescents experienced more frequent and intense bullying in schools. This research may indicate that the teachers who responded were underestimating the number of relational bullying events in their schools or that the teachers possibly did not have the foundational understanding to accurately identify the amount of bullying that occurs in their schools. Or, as Leff et al. (2007) and Cullerton-Sen and Crick (2005) argued, it might be more difficult for middle school teachers to be on top of all the aggression given that they have students for a short period of time each school day. The implications are that we need to educate all teachers, including middle school teachers, about these behaviors and we need to start early with prevention and intervention efforts, because it is a time when teachers are more privy to these events.

Another important result was that the teachers in this study reported that they perceived girls to be involved in relational aggression incidents 97.9% of the time, while they thought boys were only involved in those situations 2.1% of the time. Research shows inconsistent findings regarding the prevalence rates of relational aggression among males and females. However, most research has demonstrated that boys and girls show more similar rates of relational aggression (e.g., Card et al, 2008; DeHart & Stauffacher, 2006) rather than the stark contrast reported in this research. This may indicate that teachers are greatly influenced by the media's depiction of relational aggression as being a phenomenon associated only with girls. This is unfortunate, as it means they may overlook relational aggression difficulties in boys and provide fewer intervention strategies for them.

Implications for the Field

This research study was conducted to better understand relational aggression as perceived by classroom teachers at the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Given that teachers spend a

majority of their day with students, they are privy to a wealth of knowledge regarding their students' social behaviors. The survey was aimed at helping tease out teachers' views of socially accepted versus popular students and the characteristics they viewed those students possess. Relatively little research has been conducted with middle school teachers, and no published study has examined teachers' distinction between popular and accepted students. Such work is important given that research has suggested different social implications for each group of students. In addition, the survey used in this study had teachers report on how they responded to relationally aggressive situations. Again, such information is important because some research has shown that teachers' responses to relational aggression influence the social behaviors students perceive as acceptable and effect the extent to which students are accepted in the classroom.

Not only did this research project attempt to determine middle school teachers' views regarding relational aggression that have not yet been studied extensively, it also has important implications for school psychologists. Given that school psychologists have extensive backgrounds in research and the implementation of interventions, it is only logical that these service providers be actively involved in relationally aggressive incidents in schools. Teachers in this study reported that they sought help and support from other school service providers, including school psychologists 8% to 47% of the time in situations involving relational aggression. School psychologists must be aware of the special bonds between teachers and their students and appreciate those relationships and use that empathy as a launching point to help teachers intervene and identify students' social relationships and difficulties. These professionals must seek out that information from teachers because it can be useful in terms of identifying behaviors of students and intervening. Not only should school psychologists use teachers as a

source of information, they should also help teachers gain a better foundation of information regarding relational aggression. The findings from this study indicated that teachers may have difficulties understanding the differences between accepted and popular students and the implications for those groups of students as shown by previous research. Also important and crucial in terms of school psychologists' role in preventing and understanding relational aggression in middle school, is the response that teachers have to relationally aggressive incidents. Research has shown that teachers are powerful in terms of their influence over their students in determining what social behaviors are considered acceptable and which students are accepted by their peers. School psychologists must be aware of this influence by teachers and attempt to help teachers respond in a supportive and effective manner to relational aggression.

Implications for Future Research

One limitation from the findings of this study is that the research previously conducted on relational aggression, which included clear definitions and distinctions between groups of students, such as those who appear to be well-liked or popular by their peers were not defined for the teachers who completed the survey. The results from this study shed light on some of the confusion teachers may have in understanding the implications of and being able to accurately identify the differences between students who are genuinely accepted by their peers and those who are viewed as popular. It is possible that providing teachers with a clear set of definitions for accepted and popular students may have yielded different findings in terms of the perceived behaviors of each group. Another possible limitation to this study was the selection of the middle schools themselves. One of the schools, Crosswinds Arts and Sciences Middle School, in Woodbury, Minnesota, was a magnet school. None of the other 4 middle schools in Wisconsin were magnet schools, so the selected population and make-up of the magnet school may have

brought different teacher standards, student behaviors, and school expectations into the research. Another limitation of this study was the absence of a measure, other than the teacher survey, that assessed how accurately teachers were able to identify relational aggressive behaviors and popular versus accepted students. An added tool that would have measured teachers' actual identification of relationally aggressive students based on sociometric reports may have been helpful in further clarifying teachers' confusions and possible misconceptions about those types of aggressive behaviors and the students who use them. An example of an additional tool that could be used would be peer nominations, which would give information from a student's perspective.

Conclusion

Bullying occurs in schools today at an alarmingly high rate. The need for adults, including school service providers, to be aware of different forms of bullying and effectively respond to them is crucial for our children's well-being. Based on the findings reported here, teachers may have some confusion and difficulties identifying accepted and popular students, as well as the different types of behaviors that tend to be associated with each group of students. Teachers may also be likely to be influenced by popularized media marketing regarding relational aggression and not have as ready access to research and empirical findings regarding this type of aggression, based on the finding that teachers tend to view girls as overwhelmingly more relationally aggressive than boys. Educating school service providers and providing resources by trained and informed professionals is critical.

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Appendix A.

This project has been reviewed by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46

Letter of Introduction

Date: March, 2008

Dear Middle School Teaching Staff:

I am writing to request your participation in a survey of middle school teachers regarding their perceptions of school aggression and bullying. I am in the process of completing the final requirements at the University of Wisconsin-Stout for an Education Specialist Degree in the School Psychology program and am in need of your assistance. This survey is designed to be completed in about ten to fifteen minutes.

The issues of student aggression, bullying, and victimization have gained increased attention in this country. The purpose of this survey is to gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the occurrence of and severity of aggression, bullying, and victimization in the schools, as well as, the ways in which they might respond to these events. It is hoped that this information can be used to help school districts better meet the needs of students and staff, and prevent aggression and bullying in the future. Therefore, your assistance is invaluable.

If you agree to participate in this research, you may complete the enclosed survey. Should you choose to participate, any personally identifying information will be removed and kept separate from the data collected.

I hope that you will choose to participate. All surveys need to be completed and returned to me by _____. If you choose not to participate, simply ignore this letter and do not complete the survey. As a token of appreciation, a raffle for a $40.00 gift certificate to the Red Lobster/Olive Garden Restaurants is being offered. If you choose to participate and would like to be entered in a raffle drawing, please e-mail your name and address to dehnk@uwstout.edu.

Thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. Please feel free to contact me at dehnk@uwstout.edu with any questions regarding this study, or you may contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Crystal Cullerton-Sen at (715) 232-2182.

Respectfully yours,

Karalyn Dehn, M.S. Ed.
UW-Stout Educational Specialist Candidate
Department of School Psychology

Dr. Crystal Cullerton-Sen
UW-Stout Professor
Department of School Psychology Advisor

Informed Consent

I understand that by completing this questionnaire, that I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Appendix B.

Student Behaviors and Interactions

What is your Gender (please circle): Male Female

How many years have you been teaching? _____ years

Middle school teachers may use different approaches to address problems amongst peers. We're interested in knowing how you typically feel about and handle students' problems with their peers. Below are some statements regarding experiences that teachers may have with their students and how students interact with their peers. Please indicated **how often** you do the following . . .

Use the following scale to record your answers:

1 Never	2 Once in awhile	3 Some of the time	4 Very Often	5 Always

1. **How often** do you . . .

_____ care about, listen to, like, and respect the opinions of your students.

_____ feel happy with and considerate of your students.

_____ feel that you and your students respect, understand, and have a good relationship with one another.

2. Please rate **how often you feel this way** toward students who spread rumors about others students, intentionally exclude students from social gatherings, and threaten the loss of friendship for noncompliance to a request . . .

_____ I generally tolerate this behavior.

_____ I generally like students who engage in those behaviors.

_____ I generally let students who engage in those behaviors get their way.

_____ I think these behaviors are normal for middle school students.

_____ I generally allow these behaviors in my classroom.

3. Please rate **how often you feel this way** toward students who are victims of having rumors spread about them, being intentionally excluded from social groups, being threatened with the loss of friendship for noncompliance to peer requests . . .

_____ I feel sympathetic toward them.

_____ I feel protective of them.

_____ I feel especially supportive.

_____ I am more patient.

_____ I generally feel they deserve what they get.

4. **How often** do students who are **well-liked** by their peers tend to. . .

_____ be leaders in class.

_____ spread rumors about other students.

_____ succeed academically.

_____ exclude peers from social groups.

_____ have a large peer group.

_____ threaten to take away their friendship from other peers.

_____ hit or punch other students.

5. **How often** do students who are **popular** with their peers tend to . . .

_____ be leaders in class.

_____ spread rumors about other students.

_____ succeed academically.

_____ exclude peers from social groups.

_____ have a large peer group.

_____ threaten to take away their friendship from other peers.

_____ hit or punch other students.

6. When students ignore, intentionally exclude, or spread rumors or gossip about their peers, **how often** do you tell . . .

_____ tell students' parents about these incidents.

_____ tell a school service provider (e.g. school counselor/psychologist) about any of these behaviors.

_____ ask students to try and talk out their problems with their peers.

_____ ask students to apologize and make friends with peers

_____ offer to help students apologize and/or talk out their problems with peers

7. When students are ignored by their peers, excluded from social groups by their peers, or **targets** of gossip, **how often** do you tell . . .

_____ tell students' parents about these incidents.

_____ tell a school service provider (e.g. school counselor/psychologist) about any of these behaviors.

_____ ask students to try and talk out their problems with their peers.

_____ tell students to walk away those peers who act that way.

_____ tell students to talk to someone else (e.g. parents, other adults) about these incidents.

_____ ask students to apologize and make friends with peers who act in that manner.

_____ offer to help these students solve their problems with peers

8. Please **estimate the percentage** of your students about whom you feel you could accurately and fairly answer these questions. _____%

9. In your opinion, to what extent are ignoring, exclusion, rumor spreading and malicious lies prevalent amongst students at your school? (Please circle).

1 **Not Prevalent** (I rarely hear about these problems)	2 **Not Really Prevalent** (I hear about these problems only a couple of times a year)	3 **Somewhat Prevalent** (I hear about it these problems 1/ month)	4 **Very Prevalent** (I hear about these problems at least 1/wk)	5 **Extremely Prevalent** (I hear about these problems almost daily)

10. In your opinion, who's most likely to be involved in these incidents at your school (please circle)? Boys or Girls

THANK YOU for completing this survey!

Please place the survey XXXX when you have finished.

Appendix C.

Correlations of Acceptance of Relational Aggression and Views of Students (N =100)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Teachers' Reported Acceptance of Relationally Aggressive Behaviors	—				
2. Well-liked Students Believed to be Demonstrating Prosocial Behaviors	-.12	—			
3. Well-liked Students Believed to be Demonstrating Relationally Aggressive Behaviors	.18	-.20	—		
4. Popular Students Believed to be Demonstrating Prosocial Behaviors	.59	*.61	-.04	—	
5. Popular Students Believed to be Demonstrating Relationally Aggressive Behaviors	.62	**-.32	*.65	***-.30	—

Note. * All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .000$.
** All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .002$.
*** All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .005$.