



University of Cape Town

Department of Social Development

**RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND WELL-BEING:
ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONAL
AGGRESSION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THEIR WELL-
BEING.**

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree of

MASTERS IN CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

By

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NWNZUA001

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This research study would not have been possible without the numerous key role players and support structures that I am privileged to have in my life.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to explore adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their well-being. The study focussed specifically on relational aggression occurring within the school context. It explored participants' perceptions of relational aggression between adolescent girls in the school context, their personal experiences of relational aggression, the influence of relational aggression on their well-being and recommendations for addressing relational aggression in the school context. Research was conducted using a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling was used to select twenty participants. Data was collected through conducting face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methods were used to analyse the data obtained.

The findings of this study emphasised the complexity of adolescent girls' perceptions and experiences of relational aggression in their lives. The findings illustrated the existence of relational aggression within the school context and that adolescent girls were both the victims and perpetrators of relational aggression at school. The findings further highlighted the negative emotions associated with experiencing relational aggression. The seriousness of the influence that relational aggression has on the well-being of adolescent girls was also highlighted in this study. This study focussed specifically on its influence on peer relationships, academic performance and self-esteem. Participants also made recommendations for addressing relational aggression in the school context.

While taking the limitations of this study into account, the findings may benefit the Western Cape Department of Education and the research site in developing intervention strategies to address relational aggression between adolescent girls within the school context.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

1.1. Introduction:

This research study explored adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their lives. Chapter one serves as an introduction to the current research study and includes the statement of the problem, an overview of the context in which the problem exists and the significance of the study. Following this is the research topic, research questions and main assumptions. The chapter further includes the research objectives, clarification of concepts, pertinent ethical considerations of the study and reflexivity. The chapter also includes an outline of the chapters in this dissertation. A conclusion will complete the chapter.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Adolescence is a psychosocial developmental stage which is characterised by conflict between identity formation and role confusion. During this stage of development, adolescents endeavour to find out who they are, what is important to them and what they want for their future selves. During this stage of development, peer relationships become increasingly important and the family unit gradually becomes less important (Erikson, 1968; Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012).

Peer relationships serve numerous important functions in the lives of adolescents. Peer relationships play a role in identity formation, development of moral judgement and values, aid in coping with the physical and emotional changes associated with this developmental phase and with adjustment during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Micucci, 1998; Brown & Larson, 2009; Louw & Louw, 2010; Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012). Peer relationships are also an indicator of subjective well-being in children and adolescents (Casas, 2011).

Relational aggression is a phenomenon that exists within peer relationships. It is defined as behaviours intended to harm another through manipulating or damaging their relationships or experiences of acceptance, group inclusion and friendship (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression exists between peers from as young as three years old, but peaks during adolescence (Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009; Louw & Louw, 2010; Cicognani, 2011;

Steinberg, 2014; Piaget & Inhelder, 2000; Comstock, et al., 2017). Research has found that girls seem to display relational aggression from a younger age than boys and use relational aggression more often than physical aggression. Girls have also been found to be more skilled in the expression and interpretation of non-verbal communication, making them more likely to understand the hurtful and aggressive meaning behind behaviours associated with relational aggression (Kibler, 2011; Putallaz et al, 2007).

In the past, physical aggression between boys received the most attention in research. More recently though, relational aggression has become a major area of interest for research, especially because of the major impact it is proven having on the well-being of children (Wigderson & Lynch, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015; Espelage et al, 2018). Being the victim and/or the perpetrator of relational aggression is also associated with numerous negative psychosocial outcomes. These include long lasting negative effects on emotional well-being, problems with social-psychological adjustment, delinquency, lack of pro-social behaviour, maladjustment, deficits in emotional regulation, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and suicide (Sebastian et al, 2010; Bolling et al, 2011; Fite et al, 2011; Sebastian et al 2011; Pursoo, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015; Troop-Gordon, 2017; Espelage et al, 2018).

The importance of peer relationships has been stated above and the literature emphasises that these relationships have an influence on the well-being of adolescence. Relational aggression exists within peer relationships and peaks during adolescence (Putallaz et al, 2007; Currie et al, 2009; Comstock, et al., 2017). It is thus important to explore how relational aggression may influence the well-being of adolescent girls. The school context is an important factor to consider when exploring relational aggression between adolescent girls, as this is where they spend most of their day and numerous studies have found that the school environment plays an important role in risk for engaging in relational aggression (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004; Leff et al, 2010; Young et al, 2011; Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012). The school context does, however also provide one of the best settings for addressing this phenomenon (Walker, 2010).

It is evident from the above information that relational aggression is a serious issue in the lives of adolescent girls and is associated with serious negative consequences for this developmental group. Considering that research about relational aggression is an emerging area of focus, the current research study endeavours to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding relational

aggression. This will be done through exploring adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their lives.

1.3. Problem Context

The research was conducted at a primary school located in Kenwyn, Cape Town, South Africa, between the Southern Suburbs and the Cape Flats. The school was opened in 1953 and consists of 808 pupils, with 371 being boys and 437 being girls (Sunlands Primary School, n.d). The study was done with Grade six and – seven girls enrolled in the school. The researcher was employed as a social worker at this school, a factor that will be discussed later in the dissertation.

1.4. Rationale

Aggression is an important area of study as, by definition, it is behaviour intended to hurt or harm another person. It is a major concern during childhood and adolescence because of the detrimental impact it has on the victim and the negative developmental outcomes associated with being the perpetrator (Lansford et al., 2012). Research focussing specifically on relational aggression between adolescent girls is an important area of research because of the negative psycho social outcomes associated with being either the victim or the perpetrator (Sebastian et al, 2010; Bolling et al, 2011; Fite et al, 2011; Sebastian et al 2011; Pursoo, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015; Troop-Gordon, 2017; Espelage et al, 2018). As mentioned above, until recently, research about aggression has focussed on physical aggression between boys (Wigderson & Lynch, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015; Espelage et al, 2018). The current research study will thus contribute to the expanding body of knowledge about relational aggression between adolescent girls. While conducting the literature review, the researcher also noticed that all of the available research about relational aggression between adolescent girls is from international sources. Research exploring relational aggression between adolescent girls within the South African context is thus lacking. The current research study will add to the body of research specific to the South African context.

Existing research has mainly focussed on individual-level indicators of relational aggression (Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012; Preddy & Fite, 2012). Ecological Systems Theory, however, points out the importance of contextual factors, like the school environment, on the development of children and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). When exploring the

influence of relational aggression on the well-being of adolescent girls, it is thus necessary to look beyond individual level factors and consider the role that the school context may play in relational aggression. The current research study seeks to do that.

The finding of this research study will be made available to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and to the school where the research was conducted. This research will provide these bodies with insights about relational aggression between adolescent girls. The researcher also hoped that it may inform future intervention focussed on addressing relational aggression between adolescent girls within the school context. The findings may further be used to add to the code of conduct and anti-bullying policy of the school where the research was conducted.

1.5. Research Topic

Relational Aggression and Well-being: Adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their lives.

1.6. Main research questions

1. What are the participants' understanding of what relational aggression means?
2. What are the participants' personal experiences of relational aggression?
3. What are the participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being?
4. What recommendations would the participants make to the school to address relational aggression within the school context?

1.7. Main assumptions

The assumption is that relational aggression does exist between adolescent girls within the school context. In light of the influence that peer relationships have been proven to have on the general well-being of adolescents, it is also assumed that relational aggression does have a negative influence on the well-being of adolescent girls.

1.8. Research objectives

1. To explore the participants' understanding of what relational aggression means.
2. To explore the participants' personal experiences of relational aggression.
3. To investigate the participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being.
4. To explore recommendations that participants would make to address relational aggression within the school context.

1.9. Clarification of Concepts

The following definitions clarify concepts used throughout the study:

Adolescence: Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood and is accompanied by changes in most domains of functioning (Louw & Louw, 2010; Cicognani, 2011). Erikson (1968) refers to adolescence as a psychosocial developmental phase characterised by conflict between identify and role confusion, with success in this stage leading to the virtue of fidelity.

Aggression: This concept refers to any behaviour that is intended to hurt or harm another person (Lansford et al., 2012).

Relational aggression: This refers to any behaviours intended to harm another person by manipulating or damaging their relationships or experiences of acceptance, group inclusion or friendship (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Well-being: Well-being refers to the mental, cultural, social, physical and personal development of a person which results in a meaningful life with other people (Schues and Rehmann-Sutter, 2013).

Influence: The power to change and affect the way that someone or something develops, behaves or thinks (Walter, 2008).

Perceptions: Beliefs and opinions which are based on how things seem (Walter,2008).

1.10. Main ethical considerations

In social work practice, the recognition and handling of ethical aspects is critical if successful research and practice is what one strives towards (De Vos et al, 2011). The following ethical considerations pertain to this study:

Avoidance of harm is a fundamental ethical rule in social research. It is important that the researcher weigh the potential risks against the importance and possible benefits of a research project (De Vos et al., 2011). When doing research with children, special consideration has to be given to protecting their rights through the promotion of justice, respect, human dignity and equality throughout the process (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Western Cape Department of Social Development Policy and Research Ethics, 2013). This research study explored a topic that may have evoked strong feelings in the participants. During the interview process, the participants had the right not to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with. They were also able to withdraw at any point, although none of the participants did so. Additionally, if any child came across as being traumatised by the interview, the child would be referred to the school psychologist for further intervention. None of the participants, however, came across as needing further intervention nor did any of the participants request to be referred to the school psychologist during or after the interview process.

Informed consent is obtained by rendering all possible information about the goal of the study, and possible risks that the participants may be exposed to. Participation should always be voluntary and participants may not be coerced into taking part (De Vos et al., 2011). Research with children involves the parents or legal guardians giving consent, but the child still has the right to choose not to participate (Western Cape Department of Social Development Policy and Research Ethics, 2013). The school principal gave consent for the research to be done in the school and permission was obtained from the WCED to conduct the research as well. Written consent forms were given to the parents or guardians of potential participants (see Appendix A). Once the consent form was received, the study was explained to the prospective participants in an age-appropriate manner and they had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. They were then able to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the study. None of the potential participants the researcher approached declined to participate.

Deception of participants involves withholding information or providing incorrect information about a research study to ensure participation of respondents. The researcher intentionally misleads respondents to believe what is not true (De Vos et al., 2011; Alderson, 2005). There was no deception of participants during this research study and it was conducted in a transparent way. The researcher fulfilled a dual-role as researcher and social worker at the school. Possible conflicts of interest were minimised by not including children with whom the researcher had a therapeutic relationship. All of the participants were aware that the researcher was the social worker at the school, but her role as researcher in the school was made clear to the participants.

Every person has a right to **privacy**. It is the participant's right to decide when, how and the extent to which their behaviour, thoughts and beliefs are revealed (De Vos et al., 2011). This research study safeguarded the privacy of the participants by conducting interviews in a private office at the school where other children would not be able to see or hear the participants. Participants were also aware of and gave permission for the interviews to be recorded.

Confidentiality can be viewed as a continuation of privacy. It can be challenging to maintain confidentiality when conducting qualitative research due to the thick descriptions which are used to illustrate and report findings (Houghton et al, 2010; De Vos et al, 2011). This research study addressed confidentiality as part of the informed consent process. Participants were informed that the information they provided to the researcher would be handled in a confidential manner. Before conducting interviews with the participants, the researcher also discussed confidentiality and the limits thereof with them. This was so that they knew under which circumstances the researcher would be ethically obligated to report information they provided in the interview to the relevant authorities.

When participants provide information for a research study **anonymously**, it further ensures their privacy (De Vos et al, 2011). The researcher knew who the participants were, but their interviews were saved on the researcher's computer under pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity. Anonymity was also explained to and explored with the participants at the beginning of their interviews in order to encourage honest responses from the participants.

Researchers have the responsibility to ensure that they are adequately **skilled and competent** to undertake a research study they have in mind and that research be done in an ethical manner

(De Vos et al., 2011). The researcher is a qualified social worker, and was thus adequately skilled to undertake this research study. She was also supervised throughout the research process.

The **findings of a research study** should be presented to the public in written form. The research report should be clear, contain all relevant information, be unambiguous, may not be manipulated and should be accurate and objective. (De Vos et al., 2011). Prospective participants were informed about the publication of the research findings and what this entails as part of the informed consent process. The researcher also plans to develop a leaflet for participants explaining the findings of the research in an age-appropriate way.

Debriefing sessions is one of the ways in which researchers can assist participants to minimise any likelihood of any stress reactions or psychological harm that may have been done when participants shared their experiences. (De Vos et al., 2011). The researcher addressed this by offering each participant the opportunity to say how they felt at the end of the interview and to ask any questions that they might have had. The participants would also have been referred to the school psychologist for counselling if the researcher thought it necessary or if the participant indicated that they wanted to be referred. The researcher worked at the school where the interviews were conducted. This allowed the participants to approach the researcher after the interviews had been concluded if they had the need to be referred to the school psychologist. As indicated above, none of the participants needed this service after the interview process.

1.11 Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves reflecting about how the researcher's role in the study, their background, experiences and culture could potentially shape their interpretations of the data collected during the research process. It is more than simply advancing biases in the study, but explores how the background of the researcher may shape the direction of the study (Cresswell, 2014). The researcher was interested in the study of relational aggression, as the researcher noticed it existing within numerous relationships between adolescent girls within the school context. Based on the researcher's engagement with adolescent girls as a social worker in the school, it also seemed as if relational aggression negatively affects adolescent girls on numerous levels. The researcher hoped that coming to a better understanding of this phenomenon would enable her to develop intervention strategies to prevent and address relational aggression within the school. The researcher is, however, aware that her role as social worker in the school may have

influenced her objectivity. The asymmetrical power relationship between the sample, who are children, and the researcher, an adult, may also have influenced how honest participants were during interviews. The researcher attempted to minimise these factors by addressing them during supervision.

1.12 Structure of the dissertation

This minor dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter one presents the formulation of the research problem. Chapter two provides an overview of existing research pertaining to the current research study. The methodology of the research study is presented in chapter three. Chapter four reports on the research findings. The report is concluded with chapter five, which presents recommendations based on the research findings and the researcher's concluding remarks.

1.13 Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their lives. This chapter outlined the problem formulation which included the research topic, research questions, research objectives and the main assumptions of the researcher. It also provided definitions of important concept associated with this research study. Discussions of the ethical considerations pertaining to the study and reflexivity were provided and finally the structure of the dissertation was provided The second chapter presents the literature review.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that underpin the current study and the policies that speak to this area of research. This is followed by an overview of current literature regarding relational aggression, the influence of relational aggression on well-being and interventions to address relational aggression in the school context. Some concluding remarks complete the chapter.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

2.2.1 Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson (1968) developed a theory of psychosocial development based on the epigenetic principal that people move through eight psychosocial developmental stages from birth to death. Each of these stages are characterised by a particular conflict or crisis that has to be resolved. Adolescence is the fifth stage and is characterised by the challenge between identity versus role confusion. Adolescence is defined as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. It is accompanied by changes in most domains of functioning and is characterised by increased stress and pressure (Louw & Louw, 2010; Cicognani, 2011). During this stage of development, adolescents endeavour to find out who they are, what is important to them and what they want for their future selves (Cicognani, 2011).

This conflict between identity and role confusion contribute to adolescents experiencing identity crisis' during which they experiment with different identity roles and question their values. Identity comprises of one's self-concept and one's self-esteem. Self-concept refers to a set of beliefs a person has about themselves. This may include beliefs about their attributes, roles, goals, interests, values and beliefs. Self-esteem is formed by a person's evaluation of their self-concept. Self-esteem develops uniquely in every adolescent and can either decrease, increase or remain stable throughout adolescence (Zimmerman et al, 1997).

During the adolescent phase of development, peer relationships become increasingly important and the family unit gradually becomes less important (Erikson, 1968). This is because peer

relationships serve numerous functions important to the development of adolescents. Peer relationships play an important role in identity formation during adolescence (Galliher & Kerpeleman, 2012). Adolescents also begin to develop moral judgement and values and begin to define how they are different from their parents through their relationships with peers (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Micucci, 1998). Peer relationships can help adolescents to cope with the physical and emotional changes associated with this developmental phase as well (Louw & Louw, 2010). Additionally, peer relationships have an influence on adjustment during adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009).

When exploring the influence that relational aggression has on the well-being of adolescent girls, it is necessary to consider the psychosocial developmental stage they find themselves in as this provides a lens through which to understand adolescent behaviour and also to understand what their needs may be.

2.2.2 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. This theory regards people within the context of a system of relationships that form their environment. It defines complex layers of the environment which have an effect on every person. These layers affect each other as well and are bidirectional in nature and changes or conflict in one layer will ripple throughout the other layers. These layers consist of the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The microsystem is the layer closest to the individual and consists of relationships and interactions in the individual's immediate environment. This may include family, school and neighbourhood. The mesosystem serves as the connection between the different structures that form part of the microsystem. The exosystem is the larger social context within which the person does not directly function. This could include factors like community-based resources. An individual isn't directly involved in the exosystem, but the exosystem still has a bidirectional relationship with the microsystem. An individual thus experience the positive or negative force of what occurs within the exosystem. The macrosystem is the fourth layer which is considered as being the outmost layer of a person's environment. This layer consists of cultural values, customs and laws. Lastly, the chronosystem represents the dimension of time as it relates to a person's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Understanding relational aggression within the school context necessitates the examination of the bidirectional relationships between adolescent girls and their environment. Whether a child is the victim or the perpetrator, relational aggression will affect their environment on numerous levels. The current study is interested in how relational aggression influences the well-being of adolescent girls. As mentioned above, the indicators of well-being form part of all of the different layers of a child's environment. Relational aggression and its influence on well-being can thus not be explored without holistically considering all of the systems that may influence and child and by which a child may be influenced.

2.3. Policy and Legislation

2.3.1 The Children's Act, 38 of 2005

The Children's Act consolidates the law on all matters pertaining to children. It aims to promote the preservation and the strengthening of families in South Africa and gives effect to the constitutional rights of children. It provides structures, means and services in order to promote and monitor the sound intellectual, emotional, social, psychological and physical development of children. The Children's Act also aims to develop community structures in order to help provide care and protection for children. An important object of the Act is further to protect children against exploitation, discrimination and other physical, emotional and moral risk. The Act also aims to provide care and protection to children who need it and to recognise special needs that children with disabilities might have (*Children's Act, No 38 of 2005*, 2005: chap 1). The current study is interested in the influence that relational aggression has on the well-being of adolescents. The Children's Act thus speaks to the current study in its general aim to promote the well-being of children. It also speaks to the current study in its aim to protect children against emotional and moral harm. This study endeavoured to protect the emotional safety of the participants throughout the research process and was informed by the Children's Act.

2.3.2 Integrated School Health Policy

The Integrated School Health Policy (National Department of Health (NDOH), 2012) is adapted from the Schools Health Policy and Implementation Guidelines that was introduced in 2003. The goal of this policy is to improve the general health of school-going children, improve the environment of schools and to address health barriers to learning. The policy includes the provision of health education with a focus on mental health issues. It also includes screening and assessment of the mental health and psychosocial risks of learners. Part of the

implementation of the program includes assessing the mental health of learners and providing psychosocial support and counselling to learners as well (NDOH, 2012). This policy speaks to the current research study through its focus on, not only the physical health, but also the mental health of children within the school context. This policy also speaks to the focus on intervention programs to promote the health of school children and is relevant to the current study as this research also makes recommendations regarding future intervention programmes regarding relational aggression between adolescent girls within the school context.

2.4. A conceptual overview of relational aggression

Aggression during childhood is an important area of study as it is a predictor of future maladjustment in adolescence and into adulthood (Espelage et al, 2018). By definition, aggression is behaviour intended to hurt or harm another person and is a major concern during childhood because of the detrimental impact it has on the victim and the negative developmental outcomes associated with being the perpetrator (Lansford et al., 2012). Research has also made distinctions between physical and relational aggression. Relational aggression was first conceptualised by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), who defined it as behaviours intended to harm another through manipulating or damaging their relationships or experiences of acceptance, group inclusion and friendship. Relational aggression is generally covert in nature and may include behaviours like manipulations, excluding someone from social groups, gossiping, rolling of the eyes, telling lies, verbal and non-verbal ridicule, spreading rumours and cyberbullying (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2002; Crapanzano, Frick & Terranova, 2009; Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Kibler, 2011; Radliff and Joseph, 2011).

What follows below is a conceptual overview of relational aggression through an exploration of the development of relational aggression from childhood to adolescence, gender differences in the use of relational aggression, causes of the phenomenon, consequences of being the victim or perpetrator and coping strategies used to deal with the negative emotions associated with relational aggression. This is followed by an overview of relational aggression in the school context and the relationship between relational aggression and cyber aggression.

2.4.1 The development of relational aggression through childhood and adolescence

As indicated in chapter one, research suggests that relational aggression exists between peers from as young as three years old (Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009). Pre-school children

already understand that exclusion can be hurtful and often display behaviours like telling a peer to go away, covering their ears when someone is talking, walking away from a peer that is trying to talk to them, teasing and name calling. After pre-school, relational aggression often presents through attacks on a peer's sense of self. This manifests through behaviours like lying about a peer or excluding a peer from the group (Kibler, 2011).

Relational aggression becomes more complex and children become more intentional with this behaviour during middle childhood. Advances in cognitive development and the resulting development of verbal and social-cognitive skills, necessary to execute subtle forms of aggression seems to contribute to this (Smith, Rose & Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Kibler, 2011). Children in this phase of development also engage in less physical aggression and more relational aggression, as the risk of punishment for this type of aggression is far less. Relational aggression may also increase because of the ascending importance of social relationships. Disrupting social relationships may thus be a more effective way of harming a peer than physical aggression may be (Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009; Kibler, 2011).

The current study explores the influence of relational aggression on the well-being of adolescent girls. As indicated earlier, Erikson (1968) theorised that this is a period where adolescents experience an 'identity crisis' and during which they attempt to define who they are and how they fit into society. It is also characterised by increased independence and changes in physical and emotional functioning (Petts, 2014). Significant brain development takes place during this phase of development as well. This allows for the development of formal cognitive operations to start emerging and reasoning capacity becomes more logical, abstract and complex (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000; Steinberg, 2014). Together with increased involvement in peer relationships, this development sets the scene for relational aggression to become more complex, intentional and often peaking during adolescence (Comstock, et al., 2017). Additionally, adolescents experiment with different identity roles during this phase of development, leading to adolescents often being both the victims and perpetrators of relational aggression (Zimmerman et al, 1997; Radliff and Joseph, 2011). Many gender differences in the development of relational aggression strengthen during adolescence as well. These gender differences in the development of relational aggression are further discussed below.

2.4.2 Gender differences in the development of relational aggression

Early studies about aggression focussed more on direct forms of aggression like physical violence and verbal insults, with gender differences in physical aggression being well-established. (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Lansford et al., 2012). Generally, it has been accepted that girls display relational aggression more often than boys. However, empirically, mixed results have been reported in studies of gender differences in relational aggression. Though most research has found that girls display relational aggression more often than boys, some studies have found little difference between genders. It seems that boys do engage in relational aggression as well (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Tackett, Waldman & Lahey, 2009).

While taking this into account, research has found that girls seem to display relational aggression from a younger age than boys, possibly because of earlier maturity in social intelligence. During adolescence, girls attempt to manipulate their social worlds through subtle forms of aggression as peer relationships become more important. Their social perspective-taking skills are more advanced than boys at this stage and allow them to effectively make use of relational aggression. (Smith, Rose & Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Kibler, 2011). Girls also have been found to use relational aggression more often than physical aggression. Girls have been found to be more skilled in the expression and interpretation of non-verbal communication than boys, thus making them more likely to understand the hurtful and aggressive meaning behind non-verbal communication (Putallaz et al, 2007; Kibler, 2011).

2.4.3 Causes of relational aggression

Girls may engage in relational aggression for numerous reasons. It may be because of real or perceived disloyalty from friends, out of fear of becoming targets themselves or because of a lack of effective conflict resolution skills (James et al, 2011). Owens, Shute and Slee (2000b) suggest that relational aggression between girls occur for one of two reasons. The first being to alleviate boredom and create excitement. The second is categorised as friendship and group processes, which include attention-seeking, belonging to the right group, jealousy, self-protection, revenge and the need for inclusion. Kraft and Mayeux (2018) support this, emphasising jealousy and its role in behaviours associated with relational aggression. Peers who are perceived as threats are more likely to be excluded from their peer group.

Another reason for girls displaying relational aggression is to become more popular, as adolescent girls who use relational aggression are perceived as being more popular by their peers as popularity is associated with having more power in a peer group and this power has been associated with displaying relational aggression. (James et al, 2011; Gangel et al, 2017). Relational aggression thus serves a purpose in the social lives of girls and is often a communication strategy used to reach a certain goal (Polan et al., 2012; Page and Charteris, 2017).

All of the above-mentioned reasons for adolescents displaying relational aggression may, however, be symptoms of more complex behaviour that could be either conscious or unconscious (James et al, 2011). Relational aggression is modelled to adolescent girls from various sources. Exposure to relational aggression through media is associated with adolescents displaying relational aggression themselves (Linder & Werner, 2012; Martins, 2013). Children also experience and learn negative conflict resolution skills and behaviours associated with relational aggression from their parents. Harsh parenting, uninvolved parenting and psychologically controlling parenting have been associated with increased relational aggression in adolescents (Kawabata et al, 2011).

Additionally, personality factors may play a role in adolescents displaying relational aggression. A lack of empathy and remorse, impulsivity and sensation seeking are associated with relationally aggressive behaviours in adolescents (Dane & Marini, 2014; Kokkinos, Voulgaridou & Markos, 2016). Relational aggression may also be caused by unconscious reactions to dynamics in relationships between adolescents (Hey, 1997). Adolescent girls may experience relational aggression as a threat to their sense of self. This may lead them to act aggressively themselves in order to protect their personal status (Batchelor, 2010).

Relational aggression is thus a complex phenomenon which is caused by several conscious and unconscious factors that form part of different systems in an adolescents' lives. Considering the complex nature of relational aggression, it is imperative to explore the consequences of relational aggression in the daily lives of adolescent girls.

2.4.4 Consequences of relational aggression

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, relational aggression becomes more prevalent and complex during the adolescent stage of development. While occasional experiences of

relational aggression may be painful, they are not necessarily damaging in the long term. Ongoing relational aggression is, however, associated with long lasting negative effects on the emotional well-being of those involved (Ellis, Crooks & Wolfe, 2009; Young et al, 2011).

Both the victims and perpetrators of relational aggression may experience long-term difficulties in social-psychological adjustment, although victims suffer most (Linder & Werner, 2012; Pursoo, 2013). Relational aggression is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes including delinquency, lack of pro-social behaviour, problems with peer associations, physical aggression, substance use, maladjustment, deficits in emotional regulation, anxiety and depression (Marshall et al, 2015; Espelage et al, 2018) Heightened affective, neural, and physiological responses to rejection and exclusion and depressive symptoms increase during adolescence as well (Sebastian et al, 2010; Bolling et al, 2011; Sebastian et al 2011). This increased susceptibility to depression can amplify the effect of relational aggression on mental health (Troop-Gordon, 2017). It is concerning to note that suicidal ideation is higher in both the victims and the perpetrators of relational aggression than with adolescents who have not engaged in or experienced relational aggression (Fite et al, 2011). Relational aggression thus has serious possible repercussions for the victim and the perpetrator. Considering this, it is necessary to explore how adolescents cope with relational aggression in their daily lives.

2.4.5 Coping strategies

It is clear that relational aggression may be a significant stressor for adolescents and have serious consequences in their lives. However, not all children who have been the victim or perpetrator of relational aggression experience maladjustment (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010; Flanagan et al, 2013). It is thus important to explore how they cope with the stress that could be caused by experiencing relational aggression.

Coping is defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts made to manage external and/or internal demands that are experienced as taxing or beyond the resources a person possesses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). More recent literature describes coping as the way in which people mobilise, modulate, manage and coordinate behaviour, emotions and attention when they experience stress (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2009).

Coping is a broad concept and there have been a great number of distinctions made regarding the different types of coping strategies that exist (Carver, 1997). It thus makes sense that

victims of relational aggression may employ a variety of coping strategies. These include verbal confrontation, seeking revenge, seeking support and advice from family and friends, distraction, conflict resolution, ignoring, avoidance, humorous response and rumination (Elledge et al., 2010; Shin & Ryan, 2012; Gomes, 2011).

In general, there are certain coping strategies that have been found to be more effective in enabling adolescents to cope with relational aggression, while others have been found to increase their risk for maladjustment. Seeking social support is associated with positive social adjustment, decrease in risk of future victimisation and fewer internalising problems (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010). In addition to this, problem solving and assertiveness have also been found to be effective strategies in coping with relational aggression, having a de-escalating effect on future incidences of relational aggression in comparison to aggressive responses (Flanagan et al, 2013). Coping strategies that have generally been found to be ineffective include ignoring, distancing, retaliation, rumination and reactive strategies such as crying, venting, aggressive behaviour and revenge (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011; Flanagan et al, 2013; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013).

2.4.6 Relational aggression in the school context

This study is interested in exploring the influence that relational aggression may have on the well-being of adolescent girls, specifically within the school context. Existing research has mainly focussed on individual-level indicators of relational aggression (Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012; Preddy & Fite, 2012). Ecological Systems Theory, however, points out the importance of contextual factors, like the school environment, on the development of children and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). When exploring the influence of relational aggression on the well-being of adolescent girls, it is thus necessary to look beyond individual level factors and consider the role that the school context may play in relational aggression.

Numerous studies have found that the school environment plays an important role in risk for engaging in relational aggression (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004; Leff et al, 2010; Young et al, 2011; Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012;), with the reasons therefore varying across existing literature. As adolescents seek increased autonomy and independence from adult supervision (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Frick, Christian, & Wootton, 1999), the number of settings that adolescents engage in relational aggression also increase. In schools, the context in which relational aggression occurs multiplies, including classrooms, hallways, playgrounds

and extramural activities (Troop-Gordon, 2017). School level indicators of disorder, like high student-teacher ratio, poverty level, school size, lack of supervision, teacher characteristics and concentration of students with behavioural problems are also associated with involvement in different types of bullying and aggression (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2009; Bradshaw, Waasdorp & Johnson, 2015).

In addition to the influence that the school environment may have on risk for engagement in relational aggression, this phenomenon, in turn, also has an influence on the school environment. Experiencing high levels of exposure to relational aggression, whether as the victim or witness, contribute to adolescents viewing their schools as hostile and unsafe (Goldstein, 2008; Low, Frey & Brockman, 2010). The school environment can, however, also act as a protective factor against relational aggression. One factor that plays an important role in this regard is teacher-student relationships. Research has found that positive student-teacher relationships in schools promote lower levels of aggression between students (James et al, 2011). Other factors that may have a mediating impact on relational aggression in schools may include schools' responsiveness to relational aggression and school level norms regarding this phenomenon (Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012).

The above-mentioned literature thus suggests a complex relationship between relational aggression and the school environment. Not only may certain conditions in the school environment increase relational aggression, but the school environment can also act as protective factor against relational aggression. A reciprocal relationship between the school environment and relational aggression is further suggested, with relational aggression having an influence on how adolescents experience their school environments as well.

2.4.7 Relational aggression and cyber aggression

The internet is a popular context for adolescents to socialise with each other and internet connected electronic devices have thus become a central feature in the social lives of many adolescents (Goldstein, 2016). This way of socialising has been shown to promote social involvement, psychosocial adjustment and academic achievement during the adolescent phase of development. Of concern, however, is the aggressive behaviour that occurs between peers during online interaction, also referred to as cyber aggression (Schoffstall & Cohen, 2011). Adolescents have been found to engage in relational- and cyber aggression more often than during previous developmental stages (Wang et al, 2010; Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2012).

Research has found that engaging or being the victim of relational aggression may lead to engaging or being the victim of cyber aggression. Adolescents who are already aggressive and socially manipulative in face-to-face interactions may find cyber aggression particularly appealing, viewing it as an additional medium for aggression towards peers. The anonymous nature of social media also enables adolescents to spread rumours and gossip, often without the repercussions that is often associated with when one engages in these behaviours in a more overt way (Sontag et al, 2011; Law et al, 2012). In contrast to cyber aggression being displayed anonymously, it has also been found to take place between adolescents who have had face-to-face interactions within the school context. According to Cassidy, Jackson and Brown (2009), cyber aggression often occurs as retaliation or as a reaction to an event that occurred between peers at school. Although anonymity is an important factor in cyber aggression, many cyber aggression incidents are related to face-to-face exchanges with peers that is moved from the school context to an online media platform (Walker, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Cyber aggression may thus be an additional way for an adolescent to display aggression towards peers or may be a reaction or retaliation related to a relational aggression that occurred at school.

It is also important to note that cyber aggression is a serious concern for youth development, having been associated with numerous of the negative psychosocial consequences that experiences of relational aggression are associated with. These include low-self-esteem, lower school performance, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Schneider et al. 2012; Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Experiencing both relational- and cyber aggression may thus place adolescents doubly at risk for the negative psychosocial consequences associated with these phenomena.

2.5 Relational aggression and well-being

The current research project is interested in how relational aggression influences the well-being of adolescent girls within the school context. The recent shift to a more holistic approach in education makes this area of research one that might be valuable to numerous schools and thus adds to the value of the current study. What follows below is an overview of general well-being and how it is influenced by relational aggression. This is followed by a more specific overview of the influence that relational aggression has on peer relationships, academic functioning and self-esteem.

2.5.1 General well-being and relational aggression

General well-being in children and adolescents is highly contextual, varying across different economic, social, cultural and political contexts (Marjanen, Ornellas & Mantynen, 2016). General well-being also fluctuates on a frequent basis, especially during the adolescent phase of development (Minkkinen, 2013). Because of the lack of consensus regarding this concept and the contextual nature of well-being, a multidimensional approach to its definition is most appropriate (The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2007). Schues and Rehmann-Sutter (2013) speak to this, defining general well-being in children and adolescents as being related to the mental, cultural, social, physical and personal development of children, resulting in a meaningful life with other people. Curry et al (1997) adds to this, stating that several factors may influence the general well-being of a child or adolescent. These include family relationships, peer relations, school environment and neighbourhoods that adolescents form part of.

UNICEF (2007) highlights the importance of having both objective and subjective indicators of general well-being. Objective indicators of well-being in childhood and adolescence include household income, information deprivation, physical health, school achievement and family structure. Subjective indicators of well-being include relationships with family, relationships with peers, self-esteem, physical health, engagement in risky behaviour and school life (Casas, 2011; Orth & Robins, 2014).

What follows below is an overview of current literature regarding the influence of relational aggression on peer relationships, academic functioning and self-esteem.

2.5.2 The influence of relational aggression on peer relationships

Seminal research indicates that children who display relational aggression have friends and are often part of social groups that consist of other aggressive children (Rys & Bear, 1997). Grotper and Crick (1996) explored relational aggression and friendships between children. These authors found that relationally aggressive children experience more relational aggression in their friendships, but also experience more intimacy in their friendships than non-aggressive children. Girls who were friends with relationally aggressive girls also reported more betrayal and conflict in their friendship. Additionally, they experienced higher levels of exclusivity in their friendships than their peers who were friends with non-aggressive girls. Girls who are relationally aggressive have also been found to engage in high levels of self-disclosure. This

might be in order to elicit intimacy in order to gain control over their friends (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).

More recent research emphasises the damaging effects that relational aggression has on the formation and maintenance of friendships (Crick et al, 2001). Relational aggression is associated with lower social preference, peer rejection and lower prosocial behaviour (Banny et al, 2011). In contradiction to this, relational aggression has been positively associated with perceived popularity. Echoing earlier research, Ostrov and Godleski (2013) found that it has also been associated with more intimate friendships

From the above mentioned literature, it is apparent that relational aggression may influence peer relationships and the social lives of adolescent girls in a variety of ways. The influence that relational aggression may have on academic functioning, another factor that influences the general well-being of children and adolescents, will now be discussed.

2.5.3 The influence of relational aggression on academic functioning

Well-being in schools is an area of research that has recently started receiving more attention, with the consensus that education should be directed at the child in a holistic way (Gill, 2009; Lohre, Lydersen, & Vatten, 2010; Huitt, 2010; Gibbons & Silva, 2011). Considering that school achievement and school life are indicators of well-being in children and adolescents (Casas, 2011), it is important to explore the influence that relational aggression may have on these factors.

Early research found that engaging in relational aggression put school-aged children at risk for school drop-out and academic failure (Parker & Asher, 1987; Hymel et al, 1996). More recent research has supported this, finding that being the victim of relational aggression is associated with academic deficits, lack of school engagement and predicts poorer academic performance in future grades (Preddy & Fite, 2012; Risser, 2013; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). The lack of school engagement that has been associated with relational aggression may also lead to problem behaviours and may end in school dropout (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). In a more indirect way, the negative psychosocial outcomes related to being the victim of relational aggression may further lead to poor academic performance (Espelage et al, 2013). Additionally, the poor academic performance that may be caused by relational aggression has, in turn, been found to have an influence on the self-esteem of adolescents (Giunta et al, 2013)

Existing research thus suggests that relational aggression has a negative influence on academic functioning. School performance, in turn, has an influence on the general well-being of adolescents.

2.5.4 Relational aggression and self-esteem.

Self-esteem was first defined by James (1890), who described it as the sense of positive self-regard that develops when a person meets or exceeds important goals in their life on a consistent basis. Having a high self-esteem means that a person has a favourable view of the self, while having a low self-esteem means that a person's evaluation of the self is uncertain or negative (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995; Brown, 1998). During adolescence, self-esteem may decrease, increase or remain stable and has been found to have an influence on the general-well-being of adolescents (Zimmerman et al, 1997; Orth & Robins, 2014.). Considering the important role that self-esteem plays in identity formation and its influence on the general well-being of adolescents, it is paramount to explore how relational aggression may influence the self-esteem of adolescents.

Relational aggression exists within interpersonal relationships and interpersonal relationships have been found to have a profound influence on self-esteem during adolescence. People who feel valued and accepted by others have generally been found to experience higher levels of self-esteem than those who do not (Leary, Schreindorfer & Haupt, 1995). It thus makes sense that experiencing relational aggression is associated with lower self-esteem (Turner, Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2010; Young et al, 2011). Behaviours that form part of relational aggression, like peer rejection, have also been found to be associated with lowering in self-esteem, especially if the person had low self-esteem to begin with (Ditzfeld & Showers, 2013).

It is important to note the influence that self-esteem may, in turn, have on the functioning of adolescents. Low self-esteem has been found to have an indirect influence on poor academic achievement through psychological distress, increased deviance, absence from school, illness and decreased motivation (Lui, Kaplan & Risser, 1992; Booth and Gerard, 2011). On the other side of the spectrum, adolescents who are accepted by their peers and have mutual friendships, have higher self-esteem and do better in school (Hansen, Giacoletti, & Nangle, 1995; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). The above mentioned literature speaks to the complex connection

between relational aggression, self-esteem and numerous other areas of functioning of adolescents.

2.6 Interventions to address relational aggression in schools

Relational aggression is something that most adolescent girls will experience (James et al, 2011). Relational aggression may thus not be preventable, but the school context provides one of the best settings for addressing this phenomenon (Walker, 2010). According to Thompson and Smith (2011) schools can use proactive-, peer support- and reactive strategies to address relational aggression. Proactive strategies may include whole school approaches aimed at educating students about relational aggression, parent/caregiver involvement, classroom strategies, curriculum work, care circles and efforts to change individual attitudes about relational aggression. Peer support strategies may include peer mediation and peer mentoring, while reactive strategies may include direct sanctions, support groups and restorative approaches. (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010; Nixon & Werner, 2010; Thompson & Smith, 2011).

From the above mentioned information it can be deduced that school staff, students and support personnel like school social workers, psychologists and counsellors are important stakeholders in the implementation of these strategies. It should be noted that intervention by staff is more effective if adults within the school environment are perceived as being approachable, alert, helpful in meeting the needs of student and contribute to creating a culture of mutual care, support and advocacy amongst children (Young et al, 2011). Specific intervention strategies that have been proven to be effective in addressing relational aggression in the school context will be elucidated on below. These include disciplinary action, mediation, therapeutic intervention and care circles. Literature has also suggested that some adolescents do not want staff to do intervention regarding relational aggression in school (DeLara, 2012). This is also explored below.

2.6.1 Disciplinary action

Relational aggression can be addressed in schools through the use of disciplinary methods. One of these is having an anti-bullying policy. This provides the framework for a whole school approach to addressing all types of bullying and should include clear definitions of these together with procedures that the school will follow when bullying occurs (Thompson & Smith, 2011). Having an anti-bullying policy sets clear expectations regarding behaviours that are prohibited and discouraged in the school context as well as behaviours that are encouraged.

Anti-bullying policies have been found to be effective in reducing bullying if the content of the policy is based on sound theory and evidence and is implemented effectively (Hall, 2017).

Here, parental involvement is also important. Parents should be involved in the disciplinary procedures of a school and should be informed about the school's anti-bullying policy (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Having teachers on board and supportive of disciplinary methods is of utmost importance as well. Teachers should address every instance of relational aggression they witness according to the school's anti-bullying policy, as it helps the victim feel less powerless and communicates to the perpetrator that their actions are not acceptable. Addressing these incidences may create 'teachable moments' through which conversations can be started about difficult topics like relational aggression (Graham, 2010). The above mentioned literature emphasises the importance of different stakeholders working together within the school context in order to address relational aggression between adolescent girls.

2.6.2 Mediation

Mediation is a process where children in conflict are supported by a neutral third party, the mediator, to find a solution to their situation that is mutually acceptable (Chankova, Tsankov & Popova, 2016). It has been found to be an effective tool in addressing relational aggression as well and is a restorative intervention method that can be implemented as part of a restorative justice practice in schools. Restorative justice is an approach to discipline where all parties impacted by the issue or behaviour are brought together and where students, teachers and schools are allowed to resolve conflict, address school safety and promote academic achievement (Gonzalez, 2012). Engaging in mediation also enables adolescent girls to develop and make use of assertiveness and problem solving skills, which are linked to positive psychosocial outcomes (Flanagan et al, 2013).

Peer mediation, also a restorative intervention, is another form of mediation that has been found to be an effective method of addressing all types of bullying that may occur within the school context (Benson & Benson, 1993; Schrumphf, Crawford & Bodine, 1997; Thompson and Smith, 2011). Peer mediation involves students being trained in the structured step-by-step process of assisting their peers in resolving conflict. Peer mediators remain impartial in assisting fellow students to find an integrative solution to their conflict (Johnson et al, 1995; Calbreath & Crews, 2011). It has been found to be effective in teaching students to communicate peacefully,

provide them with creative ways of solving conflict and to be an empowering experience for students (Turnuklu et al, 2010; Jorbozeh et al, 2014).

Based on the above mentioned information, implementing mediation- and peer mediation programs may be effective strategies to form part of schools' intervention programs to address and decrease relational aggression between adolescent girls in schools.

2.6.3 Therapeutic intervention

Therapeutic intervention by a mental health professional, like a social worker, psychologist or counsellor, can form part of schools' intervention strategies to address bullying in schools (Thompson and Smith, 2011; Splett, Maras & Brooks, 2015). Research has found that these mental health professionals are more likely to make use of group therapy over individual counselling when addressing incidents of bullying in the school context (Lund et al, 2012). In contrast to this, individual therapeutic intervention has been found to be an intervention strategy that could be effective in addressing relational aggression (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010).

Even if mental health professionals do not directly aim to deliver therapeutic intervention to the victim or perpetrator of relational aggression, the negative psychosocial outcomes associated with it (Wigderson & Lynch, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015; Espelage et al, 2018), may lead to these students needing therapeutic intervention (Byers, Mishna & Solo, 2019). Prolonged victimisation by peers may also result in symptoms of trauma and post-traumatic stress reactions may also occur in adolescents who have been victimised (Crosby et al, 2010; Malove, 2014). This might lead to a further need for therapeutic intervention.

2.6.4 Care circles

Care circles, also referred to as talking circles, peace circles or circle time, is a restorative practice that is highly effective in schools and can be a proactive or reactive strategy to address all types of bullying, including relational aggression (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; Thompson and Smith, 2011). The seminal research of Jenny Mosley (1989) describe care circles as a 'whole-class meeting where everyone sits in a circle.' These circles are facilitated by the class teacher and consists of a warm-up game, rounds where everyone gets a chance to speak about the topic under discussion, open forum, celebration and closure. Circle time is grounded in humanistic psychology and a student-centred approach to learning and promotes mutual respect and the use of conversation to resolve conflict (Tew, 1998). Care circles have also been found

to be effective in enabling the deepening of friendships, creating safe spaces for adolescent girls, creating a space to express genuine emotion and cultivating empathy between in adolescents (Levine and Tamburrino, 2014; Schumacher, 2014).

2.6.5. No involvement from adults

One of the most frequently recommended strategies to stop all forms of bullying is for children to report incidents to an adult (Olweus, 1993). Although the literature in this section emphasises the role that adults can play in addressing and decreasing relational aggression between adolescent girls in schools, some adolescents do not want adults to become involved in incidents of relational aggression between them and their peers (DeLara, 2012).

Numerous factors may contribute to adolescents not reporting relational aggression or not wanting adults to become involved when an incident occurs. Some of these have been outlined by DeLara (2012). According to this author, adolescents do not report relational aggression because of its ubiquity, because they accept that it is a normal phenomenon or because they feel that adults will not be able to do anything to help them. They may also be concerned about how adults may react to them reporting bullying or fear that they will not be taken seriously. Some adolescents further do not want adults to become involved out of a need for autonomy and to be self-reliant. DeLara (2012) lastly found that adolescents do not report bullying because of feeling ashamed and specifically don't report it to their parents because they feel that their parents should have known what they are going through.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented an overview of existing literature pertaining to the current study. This study explored adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their lives. The theoretical frameworks that formed the lenses through which to view this phenomenon were Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and Ecological Systems Theory. The research process was also guided and informed by the Children's Act, 38 of 2005 and the Integrated School Health Policy. Based on the literature reviewed, it seems as if relational aggression between peers peak during adolescence and that girls display behaviours associated with relational aggression more often than boys. Relational aggression is a complex phenomenon with numerous possible causes. It is also associated with serious consequences for both the victims and perpetrators. The school environment is important to consider when exploring relational aggression between adolescent girls, as it influences the risk of engagement

in relational aggression as it provides one of the best settings to address relational aggression between adolescent girls and intervention using proactive-, peer support- and reactive strategies can be used. Chapter three presents an overview of the methodology of this research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides an overview of the various methodological aspects of the research study. It discusses the research design and population and sampling. The data collection approach that was followed, data verification and the limitations of the study are presented and as with the other chapters a conclusion completes the chapter,

3.2. Research Design

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research design. The qualitative paradigm is rooted in an anti-positivistic, interpretative approach. It is holistic in nature and endeavours to explore and understand social life and the meaning that individuals assign to social or human phenomena (McRoy, 1995; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research elicits participant accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions and produces descriptive data in the participant's written words or spoken language. Qualitative research thus involves identifying a participant's values and beliefs that underlie the phenomena being studied (McRoy, 1995). The research was further conducted using a phenomenological strategy of enquiry. Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that enables a researcher to explore and understand everyday phenomena without pre-supposing knowledge of the phenomena. A phenomenological study uses thick descriptions and close analysis of lived experiences to describe the meaning a topic, concept or phenomenon has for various individuals (Fouche in De Vos et al, 2011; Converse, 2012). When using a phenomenological strategy of enquiry, individual experiences are closely examined in order to capture the meaning, essences and common features of an event (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). A qualitative approach to research finds its strengths in the inductive, naturalistic inquiry strategy of entering a research setting without predetermined hypotheses (Patton in De Vos et al, 2011). Entering an environment without any predetermined ideas is, however, challenging. An orientational qualitative inquiry, which avoids the pretence of open-mindedness in the search for emergent theory, should thus be used. This entails that inquiry commences with an explicit theoretical perspective that determines the conceptual framework that will direct field work as well as the interpretation of findings (Patton in De Vos et al, 2011). This approach to research also emphasises a focus on individual meaning and the importance of providing an understanding of the complexity of a

situation (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is conducted when a problem or phenomenon needs to be explored (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This research study explored adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their well-being. Relational aggression is a complex phenomenon and a qualitative research design was most effective in creating understanding and a holistic account of the meaning that adolescent girls assign to relational aggression in their lives and within the context of a school. A Phenomenological strategy of enquiry was most appropriate for this research study, as it enabled the researcher to create this understanding through thick descriptions and close analysis of the participants' lived experiences. A qualitative approach was also chosen, as the researcher wanted to empower the participants to share their stories and to get a first-hand, holistic understanding of relational aggression from the perspectives of the participants. Qualitative research is also conducted when an understanding of the context or setting in which the phenomenon being studied is required (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Understanding the contexts in which relational aggression between adolescent girls occur was central to exploring the lived experiences of the participants.

3.3. Population & Sampling

This research study used non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling entails that the odds of selecting a particular individual are unknown, as the researcher does not know how big the population is or who the members of the population are (Strydom in De Vos et al, 2011; Creswell, 2014). This sampling method, almost exclusively used for qualitative research, involves less cost and time than other sampling methods (Strydom & Delpport in De Vos et al, 2011). Of the various types of non-probability sampling methods, this study made use of purposive sampling. Here, the sample is composed of elements that contain the most representative attributes of the population (Strydom in De Vos et al, 2011). The researcher selects a case because it has features that are of interest for the study. It is thus of utmost importance that criteria for the selection of participants are clearly identified and formulated (Strydom & Delpport in De Vos et al, 2011).

The population for this study was adolescent females enrolled in the school where the research was conducted. Certain criteria were used to select research participants from the adolescent females enrolled in the school. Potential participants had to be in Grade six and seven and could not have had a therapeutic relationship with the researcher in the past or at the time when the participants were selected in order to ensure that participants felt no pressure to respond in a

certain way. A sample of twenty adolescent girls were selected from the population to participate in the study. The researcher gained access to the sample at the school where the research would take place. The gatekeepers included the school's principal, the Western Cape Department of Education and the parents or legal guardians of the participants. The school's principal gave consent for the research to be conducted at the school and permission was also obtained from the Western Cape Department of Education (WCED) to conduct the research. In addition to this, permission was gained from the parents or legal guardians of the participants through written consent forms, as the participants are minors. The researcher selected the first twenty girls who met the above mentioned criteria and who submitted the written consent forms (Appendix A) completed by their parent or guardian. The participants then provided verbal consent to participate in the research after the information in the written consent form was explained to them in an age-appropriate manner.

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1 Data collection approach

The present research study made use of qualitative interviews as a data collection method. Interviews were face-to-face, one-on-one and semi-structured in nature. Qualitative interviewing is a flexible, powerful tool that can be used to capture the voices of and the ways in which people assign meaning to their experiences (Rabionet, 2011). This data collection method is employed when participants cannot be observed directly and allows participants to provide historical information and for the researcher to control the line of questioning (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally with one participant at a time and generally consist of a few open-ended questions that intend to elicit the views and opinions of the participants. The dialogue may meander around the topics that form part of the interview schedule, rather than adhering to verbatim questions, and may delve into issues that are completely unforeseen. (Newcomer, 2015). This data collection approach is most suitable in cases where the researcher is interested in the complexity for a subject and when the issue is controversial or personal (Greeff in De Vos et al, 2011).

This method was most appropriate for the current research study, as it is interested in the lived experiences, stories, opinions and views of the participants. Considering the covert nature of relational aggression, observations as a form of data collection may have been challenging. Doing interviews allowed the researcher to get rich data from participants, that might not have

been possible to observe. Considering the complexity of relational aggression as a phenomenon in the lives of adolescent girls, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the conversation held on the part of the researcher and the participant and enabled the researcher to get a fuller picture of this phenomenon and its influence on the participants' well-being. The researcher had one interview in a private office at the research site with each of the participants.

3.4.2 Data collection instrument

This research study made use of a semi-structured interview schedule in order to guide the interviews held with participants. A semi-structured interview outlines the topics and questions that will be addressed during interviews in their tentative order. These interview questions are, however, flexible and interactive in nature instead of it being a fixed instrument (Newcomer, 2015). When using a semi-structured interview schedule, the participant shares more closely in which direction the interview takes and is perceived as the expert on the subject being explored. This is an effective approach, as it allows the researcher to get large amounts of data quickly and to obtain depth in data (Greeff in De Vos et al, 2011). Using a semi-structured interview schedule was especially effective for this research study, as it allowed the participants to explore ways that relational aggression influences their daily lives in ways that the researcher hadn't included in the interview schedule. This added to the richness of the data collected. The same line of enquiry was, however, followed with each participant, which added to the rigor of the study. The interview schedule was constructed using the main research questions as guide from which more in depth questions were constructed. The literature reviewed also guided the researcher in developing questions to include as part of the interview schedule (see Appendix B).

3.4.3 Data collection apparatus

A digital voice recorder was used in order to record data and field notes were made during interviews as well. The researcher obtained permission from the participants to record the interviews and ensured that they understood that the data would be transcribed after the interview was completed. Digital recordings are effective, as they are faster in collecting data than other recording tools. In addition to this, a digital file cannot get damaged, can easily be backed up, can easily be replayed and is more reliable than other tools. Using digital recordings also better renders the voice of the participants. Additionally, the researcher is able to note non-verbal behaviour like intonation and pauses during the interview (Tessier, 2012).

3.4.4 Pilot study

Conducting a pilot study is an important part of the research process, as it allows the researcher to determine whether the relevant data can be obtained from the participants with the use of the interview schedule, allows the researcher to focus on areas that may have been unclear and it allows the researcher to test certain questions. This is done so that the interview schedule may be modified if necessary in order to ensure quality interviewing during the main investigation (Kim, 2010; Strydom & Delport in De Vos, et al, 2011). The researcher did a pilot study with one adolescent girl who fit the criteria of a potential participant. The interview schedule was not edited after completing this interview, as the interview questions seemed effective in eliciting a conversation about the perceptions, experiences and opinions that the adolescent girl had regarding relational aggression.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using the integrated approaches of Creswell (1998) and Marshall and Rosman (1999), as described in De Vos et al (2011). The steps that were followed for data analysis are as follows:

1. The researcher planned to use a digital recorder for the recording of data as it would facilitate the process of analysis. Digital recording folders automatically contain the date of the interview, its duration and the folder was saved under a pseudonym.
2. Data analysis was done using a twofold approach. Data was both analysed during data collection and following the period of data collection. During the data collection process, the researcher reviewed the data collected from interviews in order to determine whether data collection procedures and strategies had to be reviewed in order to generate a most fertile array of data.
3. The process of managing data was started by transcribing all of the data collected by the digital recorder during interviews.
4. The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading through all of the transcriptions, identifying preliminary themes and patterns throughout the data collected.
5. Data was coded through the use a computer program, NVivo. The research objectives were used as the main themes during data analysis. Categories and sub-categories were then generated through considering codes identified from the theory presented in the literature review together with the codes that emerged from the data that was collected.

6. The coding scheme was used to mark and select passages in the data. These passages were then added to the relevant folders in the computer program representing a certain category or sub-category within the different themes that were identified.

7. Emergent understandings were tested throughout this process by evaluating the plausibility of these understandings and challenging these understandings by identifying negative instances of patterns and incorporating them into larger constructs. The researcher also evaluated the data for its usefulness in illuminating the questions being explored within the research study.

8. The researcher engaged critically with the categories and sub-categories that were identified during the process of analysis,

3.6 Data verification

The process of data verification is imperative, as it assures that a research study is trustworthy (Marshall & Rosman, 1995). In the pursuit of a trustworthy research study, the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the study should be considered throughout the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Maree et al., 2016).

The credibility of a research study is ensured by demonstrating that the inquiry was conducted in a way that ensures that the subject of the research was accurately identified and described (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The researcher endeavoured to ensure the credibility of the study by using research methods that are well established. The study was also done using a research design that best fitted the research questions. Additionally, theoretical frameworks that are aligned with the research question were used in order to interpret data.

Transferability questions the applicability of one set of findings to another context (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Transferability is a weakness of qualitative designs, but the researcher addressed this challenge by adhering to the methodological approach to research described in Chapter 3. Transferability was also addressed through providing a thick description of data in Chapter 4.

Dependability refers to the findings of a research study being consistent and that it could be repeated (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest an audit trail, where a researcher who is not involved in the research process examines the process and product of the research study, as the most effective way to ensure the dependability

of a study. The current research study has been closely supervised by an academic supervisor from the University of Cape Town.

Confirmability is the extent to which the research findings are shaped by the participants and not by the researcher's motivation, interest or bias (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). The researcher endeavoured to ensure confirmability through reducing the effects of researcher bias by having regular supervision. The researcher ensured that there is an auditing trail that documented the researcher's continual critical analysis of decisions made and actions taken during the research process.

3.7 Limitations

The current research study has the following limitations. These are as follows:

3.7.1 Research design

The generalisation of qualitative findings to other populations is considered as being one of the major limitations of this research design. Findings cannot be generalised to the wider population with as much certainty as can be done when using a quantitative design, as findings are not tested to determine whether they are statistically significant (Ochieng, 2009; De Vos et al., 2011). The aim of this research study is not to generalise it to a bigger population, but rather to create a deeper understanding and provide a detailed description of the perceptions and experiences of the participants within their unique context, making a qualitative approach the most suitable.

3.7.2 Sampling

The sampling method used, non-probability sampling, relies too prominently on the judgement of the researcher (Strydom in De Vos et al, 2011). The current research study made use of twenty participants attending a single school. This small sample coupled with the participants being from the same context makes generalisation to the larger South African population unlikely. This sampling method was, however used to provide rich detail and maximise the information that could be obtained about the context in which the research took place. The researcher planned to use twenty participants from the beginning of the research process, which is a small sample. The researcher would, however, have continued to interview more participants if a point had not been reached where data was being replicated. Also referred to

as saturation, this is the point at which collecting data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new categories (Creswell, 2014).

3.7.3 Data collection

Using qualitative interviews as a data collection method has its limitations, as the researcher's presence may bias responses and information is provided in a designated space instead of in the natural field setting (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the researcher was also the social worker at the school where the research was conducted, further adding to the possibility of bias responses. The researcher addressed this by explaining her role as researcher in the school. The researcher also emphasised that the participants' individual responses would be confidential in an effort to stimulate honest responses. This was explained in detail in the informed consent form that the parents or guardians of participants signed and the researcher explained it verbally to the participant in an age-appropriate way before they provided verbal consent for participation. Even though relational aggression was not observed in the participants' natural settings, doing it in a designated space provided participants with the privacy to provide information that may not have been observable in the natural setting.

Making use of face-to-face interviews is a time consuming process. In addition to this there are certain pitfalls, like the risk of the interview becoming a counselling session, potential interruptions, confidentiality and distractions, that has to be considered when conducting an interview (Greeff in De Vos et al, 2011). The current research study was at particular risk for the interview becoming a counselling session, as the researcher provided counselling to children at the school in her position as social worker. This was addressed by the researcher emphasising what her role as researcher entailed and providing them with the opportunity to see the school psychologist for counselling if needed.

Using a digital recording device for data collection allows for a fuller record than taking notes during an interview and the researcher is able to concentrate on the interview instead of concentrating on making notes. Participants may, however, feel uncomfortable about being taped and may even withdraw (Greeff in De Vos et al, 2011). This was addressed in the current study through explaining to the participants why this method was used to record the interviews and by making sure that they were comfortable with this before proceeding with the interview.

3.7.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher, possibly leading to certain themes and categories being overlooked. The volume of data makes analysis and interpretation time consuming (Anderson, 2010). The researcher thus had regular supervision so that an objective assessment of the project could be provided throughout the research process. The researcher also spent a prolonged time emerged in the data in an effort to develop and understanding of the data and to be able to identify themes and categories as well as discrepant information that ran counter to these themes and categories.

3.7.5 Researcher bias

The researcher's own bias may influence the objectivity of research findings and should be clarified at the beginning of the study (Creswell, 2014). The researcher was aware that her role as social worker in the school where the research was conducted may have influenced her objectivity. The asymmetrical power relationship between the sample, who are children, and the researcher, an adult, could also have influenced how honest they were during interviews. The researcher being an adult may also have had an influence on how data was interpreted. The above mentioned factors were addressed through reflexivity, a core characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher was conscious of how the above mentioned factors and her own biases, age and personal background could shape her interpretations of data. This was explored in supervision throughout the research process.

3.8 Conclusion

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method was used to select participants. Access to the sample was gained at school where the participants were enrolled and consisted of 20 grade six and –seven girls. Semi-structured, one-on-one, qualitative interviews were used to collect data. The researcher made use of digital recorder to record data. Numerous methods were used to verify data and to address limitations of the study. The penultimate chapter presents the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study. The chapter consists of an overview of the profile of the participants. This is followed by the framework used for data analysis. The findings of the study are then discussed using the research objectives as key headings. Each finding will be illustrated by direct quotes from the participants. The chapter is completed by a conclusion.

4.2 Profile of the participants

Table 1: Profile of the participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Grade	Prior experience of relational aggression	Family composition
1	F	13	7	Yes	Mother, father and brother.
2	F	11	6	Yes	Mother, grandmother, uncle, cousins.
3	F	11	6	Yes	Mother, father and brother.
4	F	13	7	No	Mother, father, brother, sister.
5	F	13	7	No	Mother, grandmother, aunt and sisters.
6	F	12	6	Yes	Mother, father and brother.
7	F	12	6	Yes	Mother and sister
8	F	11	6	Yes	Mother, father, grandmother and brother.
9	F	13	7	Yes	Mother, father and brothers.
10	F	12	6	Yes	Mother, father and sister.
11	F	12	6	No	Mother, father and brother.
12	F	12	7	Yes	Mother, father, sister and brother.
13	F	13	7	Yes	Mother, step-father and brother.
14	F	13	7	Yes	Mother, father, brother and sister.
15	F	13	7	Yes	Mother, father, grandmother and brothers.
16	F	12	6	Yes	Mother, father and sister.
17	F	12	6	Yes	Grandparents, aunt and sisters.
18	F	12	6	Yes	Mother, step-father, grandmother, aunt, uncles and brother.
19	F	13	6	Yes	Mother, father, sisters and brother.
20	F	11	6	Yes	Mother, father, brother and sister.

The participants in this sample were female students enrolled at a primary school and were in Grade six and seven. The majority of the participants were in Grade six and the average age of the participants was 12 years old. Most participants were living with their nuclear family, though many had extended family living with them as well. The majority of participants had experienced relational aggression, with only three participants not having experienced it before.

4.3 Framework of analysis

Table 2: Framework of analysis

Theme	Category	Sub-category
4.3.1 Participants' understanding of what relational aggression means.	1. Existing knowledge of relational aggression as a construct.	
	2. Relational aggression and the school context.	1. The existence of relational aggression in schools.
		2. Practical examples of relational aggression in school.
		3. The severity of relational aggression in schools.
4.3.2. Participants' personal experiences of relational aggression.	1. Participants as the victims of relational aggression.	
	2. The influence of relational aggression on the emotional well-being of participants.	1. Emotions associated with experiencing relational aggression.
		2. The duration of the emotions post the event.
		3. Coping mechanisms used to deal with the emotions.
3. Participants as the perpetrators in regards with relational aggression.		
	4. Reasons for relational aggression between adolescent girls.	
	5. Relational aggression and social media.	
4.3.3. Participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being.	1. Knowledge of general well-being as a concept.	
	2. The influence of relational aggression on academic functioning.	
	3. The influence of relational aggression on friendships.	
	4. The influence of relational aggression on self-esteem.	

Theme	Category	Sub-category
4.3.4 Recommendations to address relational aggression within the school context.	1. Suggested interventions to school staff.	1. Disciplinary action
		2. Mediation
		3. Intervention by the school social worker
		4. Peer mediation
		5. No intervention by staff
	2. Preventing relational aggression in the school context.	
3. Intervention strategies designed by participants.		

4.4 Findings

The findings of this research study are presented below using the research objectives as key headings.

4.4.1 Objective One: The participants' understanding of what relational aggression means.

The participants were asked to explain whether they had ever heard of relational aggression or not, how this phenomenon presents in their lives and whether or not it occurs at school. The participants also indicated examples of relational aggression that they have witnessed in the school context.

4.4.1.1 Existing knowledge of relational aggression.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the participants could not define relational aggression and did not know what relational aggression as a construct means. This was indicated by them stating that they did not know what it means or by them providing descriptions that did not correspond with the definition of relational aggression. When the researcher provided the definition of relational aggression, the majority of participants were, however, able to name examples of relational aggression that they have witnessed. The participants had thus witnessed or experienced relational aggression without labelling it as such.

“I mostly see children giving children looks and talking about their friends behind their backs when they’re absent. They just talk bad things about them.” (Participant 11)

“Like, they’ll exclude you from activities and they’ll talk bad about you behind your back and they look you up and down and then if you were to come and sit to them, they move away.” (Participant 1)

“Talk, gossiping, also not letting people sit with you and not let them play with you, and look at them up and down, like that.” (Participant 2)

The participants’ examples of relational aggression are echoed in the seminal definition of relational aggression by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), who define it as behaviours intended to harm another through manipulating or damaging their relationships or experiences of acceptance, group inclusion and friendship. This finding suggests that there is a lack of readily available information about relational aggression for adolescent girls within the school context. They are witnessing the phenomenon, but do not seem to have the information to know that it is relational aggression.

4.4.1.2 Relational aggression and the school context.

The researcher explored the existence of relational aggression in schools with the participants. Examples of relational aggression that they have witnessed in their school were also discussed. This section will discuss the existence of relational aggression in school, practical examples of relational aggression in school and the perceived severity of relational aggression in school.

4.4.1.2.1 The existence of relational aggression in schools.

It is concerning to note that, when asked about the existence of relational aggression in schools, three quarters of the participants felt that relational aggression exists within the school context. More importantly, participants highlighted that this phenomenon occurs frequently at school. They mentioned that relational aggression occurs during break time or any free time that they have. The participants also mentioned that it occurs in class and in the corridors at school when they move to different classes. These participants were of the view that relational aggression occurs specifically within the school context because their primary peer group is at school.

“Uhm, yeah, it does happen a lot. You always hear other people busy talking about other people in a rude way and stuff, making fun of them or something.” (Participant 20)

“Yes ma'am, especially the gossiping.” (Participant 14)

“Sometimes. Because I mostly see children giving children looks and talking about their friends behind their backs when they’re absent. They just talk bad things about them.” (Participant 11)

These findings are supported by numerous studies that have found that the school environment plays an important role in risk for engaging in relational aggression (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004; Leff et al, 2010; Young et al, 2011; Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012;). Aspects including a lack of supervision and a high teacher-student ratio are associated with increased involvement in high-risk behaviours like relational aggression (Bradshaw, Waasdorp & Johnson, 2015). The school context serves as an environment which gives adolescent girls access to their peers and the opportunity to interact with each other throughout the day, often unsupervised, thus creating an environment where relational aggression could occur on a frequent basis. According to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), both the school environment and peer relationships form part of the microsystems of adolescent girls’ environments. The above findings suggest that the school environment might have an influence of what happens within the social lives of adolescent girls. This emphasises the bidirectional nature of the relationship between factors that form part of the microsystems of adolescent girls’ environments, in this case, the school environment and peer relationships.

4.4.1.2.2 Practical examples of relational aggression in schools

The majority of participants agreed that relational aggression occurs in class and during break times, often in the absence of a teacher. A number of behaviours were reported that could be seen as relational aggression. The behaviours mentioned by participants include social exclusion, gossiping, spreading rumours, threatening each other, judging each other and giving each other dirty looks. These behaviours are also in line with the participants’ descriptions of relational aggression mentioned above.

“In maths class it could happen when you maybe don't get a sum and everybody else gets it. Then you put up your hand and you say: 'I don't understand' and they judge you cause you don't understand.” (Participant 16)

“You always hear other people busy talking about other people in a rude way and stuff, making fun of them or something.” (Participant 20)

“At break time when we all sit with, uhm, this one girl's group. And I don't know what's happening with this other girl, but they keep on giving her dirty looks.” (Participant 4)

These findings further highlight the important role that the school environment plays when considering relational aggression between adolescent girls. The behaviours that participants have witnessed are also in line with behaviours that existing research associates with relational aggression (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2002; Crapanzano, Frick & Terranova, 2009; Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Kibler, 2011). This correspondence between the current findings and existing research speaks to relational aggression and the behaviours associated with it as being somewhat universal, as all of the existing research studies were done with diverse groups of participants from all over the world.

4.4.1.2.3 The severity of relational aggression in schools

Participants were asked to rate the severity of relational aggression in their school from one to ten. A score of one represented that relational aggression is not an issue in school at all and ten represented that relational aggression is a crisis in school. The average score given by participants was higher than five, with most participants giving relational aggression in their school a score between five and nine. The following quotes are an illustration of the finding:

“I would say seven because compared to other schools they're, like, probably over 10. But seven is fine for me because some girls, they always have issues, but by the end of the day they all become friends again. But some also hold a grudge. I would actually rate our school a seven because some girls still talk about that person even when they know what that person is going through.” (Participant 6)

A Thousand. Because it happens a lot, especially in the high grades like the senior and the intermediate. Grade 5 to 7 it normally happens.” (Participant 13)

“It would be like a 7.” (Participant 9)

The scores that the participant gave to rate the severity of relational aggression in their school suggests that adolescent girls experience relational aggression as a serious issue within their school context. Existing research has mainly focussed on individual-level indicators of

relational aggression (Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2012; Preddy & Fite, 2012). Ecological Systems Theory, however, points out the importance of contextual factors, like the school environment, on the development of children and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The above mentioned finding thus emphasises the importance of looking beyond individual level factors when exploring the influence of relational aggression on the well-being of adolescent girls and considering the role that the school context may play in relational aggression as well.

The findings discussed as part of objective one reveal that participants did not know what relational aggression was, but had witnessed behaviours associated with it in their daily lives. Existing research accurately describes the behaviours that participants had witnessed as well. The school environment was highlighted as playing an important role in the risk for engaging in relational aggression and relational aggression was identified as being a serious issue for adolescent girls in their daily lives and within the school context. The first objective examined participants' existing knowledge of relational aggression. The findings regarding their personal experiences thereof will now be discussed.

4.4.2 Objective Two: Participants' personal experiences of relational aggression.

There were a number of key areas that emerged under this objective. The participants shared narratives about their personal experiences of relational aggression. There were five areas that they reported on. The first was their personal experiences of being the victim of relational aggression. The second area was the influence of relational aggression on their emotional well-being. This was reported on through exploring the emotions they experience associated with being the victim of relational aggression and the duration of these emotions post the event. They also discussed what coping mechanisms they employ to cope with relational aggression. The fourth area reported on was incidents when the participants themselves were the perpetrators of relational aggression. Finally, they reported on why they think relational aggression occurs between adolescent girls at school.

4.4.2.1 Participants as the victims of relational aggression

It is worrying to note that all except three participants had been direct victims of relational aggression in addition to witnessing it between peers at school. From all of the accounts shared by the participants, most of them experienced rumours being spread about them. Examples of the rumours mentioned by participants include saying that someone has lice, is pregnant when

they are not and spreading rumours that someone is needy and looking for attention. They also experienced peers gossiping about them and being excluded from their peer groups. The participants described being excluded as not being allowed to sit with a group during breaks, girls walking away from them when they go near them and the group constantly talking about events where the participant wasn't present.

“Actually my two closest friends now, they're always excluding me. I don't know why. And I think they do talk behind my back because they're always excluding me and make me feel very bad.” (Participant 3)

“I actually found out that it was one of my friends that is actually spreading rumours and it made me upset.” (Participant 19)

“My one friend told me something wrong about my other friend. And that made me so angry because it was so rude. She said my friend is so fake and stuff like that.” (Participant 6)

“I still remember last year people had written something in the bathroom about me, and then, like, it spread and I just took it off the first day I saw it, but, like, it was already spreading around the school.” (Participant 9)

These findings are in line with behaviours that have been used to describe relational aggression in literature, as mentioned in objective one, and once again highlights the seemingly universal nature of relational aggression. These behaviours include manipulation, excluding someone from social groups, gossiping, rolling of the eyes, telling lies, verbal and non-verbal ridicule, spreading rumours and cyberbullying. (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2002; Crapanzano, Frick & Terranova, 2009; Underwood, Beron & Rosen, 2009; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Kibler, 2011). It seems as if participants generally experience the same behaviours that they witness between other peers at school. The stories that participants shared were loaded with negative emotions associated with their experiences. It was thus important to explore their perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their emotional well-being.

4.4.2.2 The influence of relational aggression on the emotional well-being of participants

4.4.2.2.1 Emotions associated with experiencing relational aggression

There were three core emotions that were reported while exploring the emotions associated with relational aggression with the participants. The majority of participants expressed feeling a great deal of sadness when they were the victims of relational aggression. A large portion of them also expressed feelings of anger. A third significant emotion was feelings of loneliness and isolation. The participants said:

“Like, angry. Like, this one time I was actually going to slap this girl. She’s at aftercare but I was going to slap her because she was working on my nerves so much.” (Participant 13)

“Insecure and like sad and also really angry. It just makes me angry because...They just frustrate me. That drama is happening and I don't know how to fix it. That mostly happens. I don't know what to do anymore.” (Participant 16)

“I felt like I had no-one to turn to. I felt like it’s been, like, so many friends in so much time that I felt that I'm just jumping from one friend to another and I felt that if I did tell someone, that, that something would suddenly happen and we wouldn't be friends anymore and then they just carry on and just take my secrets with them and tell other people that they've come closer with.” (Participant 17)

“Uhm, it makes you feel sad because it's that type of bullying almost because sometimes you just want the ground to swallow you in whole because you feel sad and you don't know what else do you do.” (Participant 1)

These findings emphasise the negative influence of relational aggression on emotional well-being. This is echoed by current research about the negative psychosocial outcomes associated with relational aggression (Espelage et al, 2018; Wigderson & Lynch, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015). These findings also emphasise the seriousness of relational aggression in the lives of adolescent girls, as it seems to evoke strong emotional responses in them. In an effort to get a better understanding of the influence of relational aggression on the emotional well-being of the participants, it was important to explore how long the negative emotions associated with relational aggression endure post the event.

4.4.2.2.2 The duration of the emotions post the event

The participants differed significantly in the lengths of time they experienced the emotions associated with relational aggression. It ranged from 15 minutes to one participant expressing that she believed that it would last her entire life. The majority of participants, however, expressed that these feelings last between two to three weeks.

“It bugs me a lot though. Sometimes I'm very sad the whole day.” (Participant 3)

“For me? A few weeks maybe? But that's if it's a serious drama. If it's like: ‘Oh, you took my packet of chips, give it back’, then that will maybe last, like, a few days.” (Participant 16)

“They still are lasting because it's hard to just forgive them.” (Participant 2)

“It scars people for life. I got a cousin of mine, she got bullied in primary school and she, she's now in high school and she almost tried to commit suicide already....” (Participant 18)

These findings are similar to that of Young et al (2011), who state that occasional experiences of relational aggression may be painful, but despite what the one participant said, these authors indicate that the effects of occasional relational aggression are not damaging in the long term. Ongoing relational aggression, unlike occasional experiences of relational aggression, is however, associated with long lasting negative effects on the emotional well-being of those involved (Ellis, Crooks & Wolfe, 2009; Gangel et al, 2017). It is thus possible that participants who expressed experiencing long term negative emotions had been the victim of relational aggression more often than those who stated that the negative emotions did not last for a long time. It is concerning, though, to note that relational aggression seems to have such a lasting influence on the emotional well-being of a number of participants. Their coping mechanisms to deal with these emotions are explored below.

4.4.2.2.3 Coping mechanisms used to deal with the emotions.

The participants identified a wide range of coping mechanisms used to deal with the emotions associated with experiencing relational aggression. The coping mechanisms that were mentioned most include listening to music and talking to peers. Most unexpectedly, a number of participants also mentioned talking to their mothers or other maternal figures about their experiences of relational aggression. The covert nature of relational aggression (Radliff and

Joseph, 2011) created the assumption that this would not be something that they would talk about with adults. A significant number of the participants don't talk about their emotional experiences associated with being the victim of relational aggression. Some also mentioned emotional eating as a coping mechanism.

“My mommy's like my best friend. If I, even if I have a crush on someone, I will tell her. So, like, I tell her every single thing and she gives me the best advice.” (Participant 12)

“I don't like talking to adults as much as talking to my friends because it's just an imbalance for me because my parents don't know what's happening.” (Participant 10)

“I just keep it all to myself.” (Participant 8)

These findings concur with current research stating that adolescent girls make use of a wide range of coping mechanisms to deal with the emotions associated with relational aggression (Elledge et al., 2010; Shin & Ryan, 2012; Gomes, 2011). The seeking of social support is associated with positive social adjustment, decrease in risk of future victimisation and fewer internalising problems (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010). The findings can be linked to Systems Theory as indicated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), as it emphasises family and peers as micro level factors that have a direct influence on adolescent girls and act as sources of support for them. These findings also correspond with current research stating that some adolescent girls distance themselves from others and avoid talking about their experiences to protect them from future victimisation (Shin & Ryan, 2012; Gomes, 2011). These coping mechanisms, together with ignoring, distancing, retaliation, rumination and reactive strategies such as crying, venting, aggressive behaviour and revenge, have been found to be less effective in dealing with the negative emotions evoked by experiences of relational aggression (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013).

Based on the above mentioned findings, relational aggression seems to have a relatively lasting influence on the emotional well-being of adolescent girls and that they have to employ coping mechanisms to deal with this. It was thus prudent to explore whether participants are the perpetrators of relational aggression as well, having experienced the negative emotions associated with being the victims themselves.

4.4.2.3 Participants as perpetrators of relational aggression

Even though, as mentioned above, the majority of participants had experienced relational aggression as the victim, the majority of them also admitted to being the perpetrator of relational aggression at times. This was unexpected, as previous findings suggest that the majority of participants have experienced the negative emotions associated with being the victims of relational aggression themselves. Having experienced these negative emotions as the victims thus did not seem to deter the participants from being the perpetrators of relational aggression. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

“Because we have five people, sometimes six, but the sixth person, we don't really like her. We don't let them to sit with us. But they do have other friends. They just come to us and we don't want to be with them so we just push them away. But it's mostly me, cause I'm the stubborn one, but then I feel bad afterwards.” (Participant 10)

“I have sometimes, I won't actually gossip about a person. My friends will tell me what happened. I may gossip like, if they talk about something that I know something about.” (Participant 8)

“I think, I think I would be in a group when we would talk about it and add my part...and I'd also be like: ‘Yes, she's always so, like, clingy because she would, she would talk behind my back but then be like all friendly with me to my face.” (Participant 9)

These findings concur with Radliff and Joseph (2011) who state that adolescent girls have been found to engage in relational aggression as well as being the victims thereof. There may be numerous explanations for this. Research suggests that adolescent girls become the perpetrators of relational aggression as a coping mechanism to deal with the negative emotions associated with relational aggression (Flanagan et al, 2013). Adolescent girls have also been found to engage in relational aggression as a form of retaliation when they have been the victim of relational aggression (Gomes, 2011). These findings are also in line with Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (Erikson, 1968), which states that adolescents experience an identity crisis during which they experiment with different identity roles and question their values. Taking this into consideration, it is understandable that adolescent girls experiment with the role of perpetrator, even though they have been in the role of the victim as well.

Considering all of the above mentioned findings about participants' experiences of relational aggression, which were overwhelmingly negative, the reasons why they believe relational aggression still occurs between adolescent girls was important to explore. This will now be discussed.

4.4.2.4 Perceived causes of relational aggression between adolescent girls

The participants suggested a wide range of reasons why relational aggression occurs between adolescent girls. The majority, however, agreed that relational aggression occurs because of girls being jealous of each other. A second reason that a significant amount of participants agreed on is that girls display relational aggression in order to become more popular within their peer group or to stand out within their peer group. Interestingly, despite what previous research suggests, no participants mentioned boredom and a need for excitement as reasons for relational aggression.

“...because they want to try and be cool to be with the popular group... even, this, this year, this girl, she's like trying to be so cool, you know, she'll be rude, and then she'll laugh about it and stuff.” (Participant 2)

“I think one of the main reasons is jealousy.” (Participant 3)

*“Maybe they just want to be popular or they just want to be like their friends”
(Participant 11)*

These findings echo existing research stating that popularity is associated with having power in a peer group and this power has been associated with being nasty. Relational aggression is thus used as a means of becoming more popular or powerful with a peer group (James et al, 2011). The increasing importance of peer relationships during the adolescent phase of development may also contribute to adolescents resorting to relational aggression in an effort to gain popularity (Erikson, 1968). Additionally, jealousy has also been found to play a role in behaviours associated with relational aggression. Research has found that peers who are perceived as threats are more likely to be excluded from a peer group (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). It thus comes across as if relational aggression can serve a function within peer relationships. Adolescent girls seem to make use of relational aggression to become more popular in their

peer group or to cope with feelings of jealousy towards peers. This might be why adolescent girls choose to be perpetrators of relational aggression despite having experienced the negative influence being a victim had on their own emotional-well-being.

While exploring the perceived reasons for relational aggression occurring between adolescent girls, several participants mentioned the role that social media plays in relational aggression. The findings in this regard are presented below.

4.4.2.5 Relational aggression and social media

The role that social media plays in relational aggression presented as a significant theme with numerous participants raising this without any direct questions being asked about this subject. A number of the participants indicated that social media is used as a means to continue with relationally aggressive behaviours beyond the school context. Participants also mentioned that relationally aggressive behaviours that took place over social media, would often be discussed between peers at school the following day.

“Sometimes it happens after hours, like through the internet or something. Uhm, and then people hear of it at school. That's, I think it's because people think it's okay to hurt someone because you can't see them face to face. So they will put a comment online or they'll just message someone with the intention of making them feel good about themselves. And then by the time you get to school the next day, everybody knows about it.” (Participant 15)

“I think it also has to do with social media. Quite a lot of things happen on there also... you can DM someone so that you can speak to that person but if somebody logs into your account they can read what you're speaking about and it is true that people end up having problems.” (Participant 13)

“...then it started happening over WhatsApp and they were sending long messages to each other explaining what that person and what this person did and everyone became involved...” (Participant 17)

This corresponds with existing research stating that social media is used to move conflict from the classroom to the online environment. Relational aggression is thus moved from the school context to an online, media platform which has the potential to go viral (Walker, 2010;

Marwick & Boyd, 2014). This finding also speaks to the way in which relational aggression seems to influence different factors that form part of the microsystems of adolescent girls' environments. An event that happens at school is carried over into adolescents' homes and their family systems through the use of social media. This emphasises the bidirectional relationships between micro level factors that form part of a person's environment, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1994).

In summary, the majority of participants had experienced relational aggression, in addition to witnessing it. Their experiences of relational aggression seemed to have a negative influence on their emotional well-being. The participants employed a number of coping mechanisms to deal with the negative emotions associated with being the victim of relational aggression however it is important to note that the majority of participants were both victims and perpetrators of relational aggression despite having experienced the negative emotions associated with being the victim. This could be because they use relational aggression as a coping mechanism, form of retaliation or because they were experimenting with different identity roles. Lastly, social media was highlighted as a means through which relational aggression could infiltrate different systems that form part of the participants' lives. The influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being will now be discussed below.

4.4.3 Objective Three: Participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being.

The participants shared their experiences of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being, specific to three domains. The first domain is their peer relationships, followed by their academic functioning and their influence on their self-esteem.

4.4.3.1 The influence of relational aggression on peer relationships.

Most of the participants agreed that relational aggression has a negative influence on their relationships with peers. More specifically, they felt that it causes conflict and tension, contributes to the ending of friendships and it detracts from trust within friendships. In contrast to this, a few of the participants felt that resolving the conflict often caused by relational aggression can result in closer friendships.

“I think you'll spread a rumour about someone and then they'll find out about it and they won't want to be your friend anymore. And then you try to fix it by telling the person that you're sorry and they say, and some people say sorry isn't a plaster. It won't fix what you said about me.” (Participant 7)

“I would say that there will be a lot of tension and probably awkwardness and uhm, you won't really want to confide in each other.” (Participant 15)

“Friendships ma'am, it is meaning that you always fight with your friends, because if you don't fight, that is not a true friendship ma'am. Because best friends always fight ma'am. They forgive each other. But if you guys are not talking, you guys are not real friends. You guys are just faking each other and you just want to know everything.” (Participant 14)

The above mentioned findings concur with Grotper and Crick (1996), who found that relational aggression within friendships is associated with higher levels of conflict in friendships. More recent findings support this, stating that relational aggression is associated with lower social preference, peer rejection and lower prosocial behaviour (Banny et al, 2011). Relational aggression largely seems to have a negative influence on peer relationships. It is reassuring though, that some of the participants felt that working through and solving the conflict caused by relational aggression could make friendships stronger. This suggests that some adolescent girls view relational aggression as having a constructive outcome in their lives.

4.4.3.2 The influence of relational aggression on academic functioning.

The majority of participants agreed that relational aggression has a negative influence on their academic functioning and academic progress. The participants mentioned one of the main reasons being that it negatively influences their ability to concentrate in class. This is because girls continue talking about what happened before school and during breaks in class, thus not focusing on their studies. The participants felt their inability to focus in class negatively influenced their ability to perform optimally at school.

“So, this is something that happens to me. Like, if something is happening in our group, it takes most of my priority. My school work will... sometimes my marks will go down cause I was focussing on something that was not relevant. It just captures your attention and you become unfocussed with your work and your marks will go down and your behaviour, your ability to do something will just decrease.” (Participant 1)

When I was...when that happened at the start of the year then I was getting lower marks. Don't know why. I struggled to concentrate.” (Participant 20)

“It definitely has affected me. I don't focus a lot on my work anymore, have dropped quite a lot in my grades.” (Participant 7)

These findings correspond with research stating that relational aggression is related to academic deficits and lack of school engagement (Preddy & Fite, 2012; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). It also relates to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which highlights that changes or conflict in one layer of a person's environment can ripple throughout other layers. This supports the finding that relational aggression between peers has a negative influence on adolescent girls' ability to do their best in school. Both peer relationships and school form part of the microsystem of an adolescent girl's life, with these factors constantly influencing each other as posited by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Relational aggression is often viewed as a 'normal' occurrence between adolescent girls. The above findings are concerning, as it suggests that relational aggression has a negative influence on adolescent girls' ability to do their best in school. It is thus not simply 'girls being girls', but is a phenomenon that seems to have serious repercussions for the adolescent girls.

The third factor that emerged from the interviews with participants was the perceived influence that relational aggression has on their self-esteem. An exploration of this follows below.

4.4.3.3 The perceived influence of relational aggression on self-esteem.

A significant number of participants mentioned the negative influence that relational aggression has on their self-esteem, even though this was not a specific question that formed part of the interview schedule. The most prominent themes that arose was that it made the

participants feel like they are not good enough and made them feel that they need to change in accordance with their peers' expectations of them. It is worrying to note that a number of the participants felt that the negative influence relational aggression has on their self-esteem, also negatively influences their ability to achieve to their full potential at school. These findings allude to the complexity of the functioning of the participants. It is clear that relational aggression, academic functioning and self-esteem are experienced by the participants as connected to each other in very complex ways.

“It really lowers my self-esteem and makes me want to change myself to who they want me to be and stuff like that.” (Participant 19)

“People have spoken mean things about me. It really brought down my self-esteem and I don't like it.” (Participant 7)

“If someone gives you a negative comment, you feel bad about yourself, then while you're writing or while you're working, you start thinking, Oh, but I'm not good enough for this.” (Participant 5)

These findings are similar to those of Turner, Finkelhor and Ormrod (2010), stating that victims of relational aggression have been characterised as showing signs of helplessness, being less popular amongst peers and displaying lower self-esteem. The negative influence of relational aggression on self-esteem is concerning, as one of the main psychosocial developmental tasks during adolescence is identity formation (Erikson, 1968) and identity comprises of a person's self-concept and their self-esteem (Zimmerman et al, 1997). Relational aggression seems to have a negative influence on the participants' self-esteem, thus directly influencing their psychosocial development. Self-esteem and academic achievement have also been found to have a reciprocal influence on each other (Booth and Gerard, 2011) and relational aggression seems to have a negative influence on the self-esteem of adolescent girls which, in turn, has a negative influence on their academic functioning and then negatively influences their self-esteem. Once again, this highlights the complex way in which relational aggression, academic functioning and self-esteem are possibly connected, and the influence these factors have on the psychosocial development of adolescent girls

The findings of this objective suggest that relational aggression has a negative influence on the general well-being of the participants. Relational aggression also seemed to have a negative influence on the academic functioning of participants, which was found to have a reciprocal relationship with feelings of low self-esteem linked to experiences of relational aggression. The three objectives that have been explored highlight the significant influence that relational aggression has on the daily lives of adolescent girls. Considering this, it is important to explore how the participants believe relational aggression could be addressed within the school context. This is explored below.

4.4.4 Objective Four: Recommendations to address relational aggression within the school context.

The participants explored how they thought staff at the school should manage relational aggression and how they could possibly prevent these behaviours from occurring in the school context. The participants were also asked about which intervention strategies they would employ in the school context in order to address relational aggression.

4.4.4.1 Suggested interventions to school staff

Participants were asked to explore how they thought staff at the school should manage relational aggression in the school context. These findings are discussed with regard to disciplinary action, medication, intervention by the school social worker, peer mediation and no involvement from staff. Participants were also asked how they thought relational aggression could be prevented by the staff. These findings are discussed below.

4.4.4.1.1 Disciplinary action

Participants mentioned that they would want staff to address incidents of relational aggression, but not make it a bigger issue than it is. The participants were able to provide a number of examples of what the staff could do. One of these included that the school should take disciplinary action against children perpetrating relational aggression. Participants suggested reporting the behaviour to the perpetrator's parents, addressing the perpetrator directly, telling them to stop their behaviour and having consequences in place for children who display relational aggression. Quotes will be provided to illustrate the different examples:

“It can be prevented by, if one girl is talking about another girl they should tell her to stop because it's not right. And if they still carry on, they know they will, there has to be one who will tell them there is consequences that's going to happen if they keep on going around and telling about the gossiping.” (Participant 5)

“Phoning their parents and telling them, look here, your child is a bully and he's bullying people, or she. Then they will stop” (Participant 12)

The above mentioned finding corresponds with existing research, stating that teachers should address every instance of relational aggression they witness, as it helps the victim feel less powerless and communicates to the perpetrator that their actions are not acceptable. Addressing these incidences may create ‘teachable moments’ through which conversations can be started about difficult topics like relational aggression (Graham, 2010). Existing research also highlights the importance of having parents involved in the disciplinary procedures at school (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). According to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), different factors that form part of the microsystems of people’s lives have an influence on each other. The school environment, relationships with teachers and relationships with parents are all factors that form part of the microsystem of adolescent girls’ lives and thus have an influence on each other. The above mentioned finding illustrates the importance of these micro level factors working together in addressing relational aggression in the school context.

4.4.4.1.2 Use of Mediation sessions

Numerous participants who had been the victim of relational aggression had the need for an opportunity to address the perpetrator directly in a safe environment. Even though the participants did not use the word ‘mediation’ they suggested intervention sessions where a neutral party, like a teacher or the school social worker, facilitates a discussion between the victim and the perpetrator.

“The teacher should let the person talk and take the person that was gossiping and the person she was gossiping about. Then both of them should go and talk about it. One person should be there while they are in a quiet room.” (Participant 14)

“I'd obviously not want them to make a big deal out of it. So, not everybody needs to know about it. And then, uhm, almost like, uhm, like a therapy session, I guess, but with both people and then like with a neutral party there, one that doesn't take sides and then there we are.” (Participant 15)

“They should talk to both sides on the story and listen to everybody and they should solve it immediately.” (Participant 19)

This finding echoes existing research that describes mediation, a process where children in conflict are supported by a neutral third party, the mediator, to find a solution to their situation that is mutually acceptable, as an effective tool to address relational aggression in the school context. (Gonzalez, 2012; Chankova, Tsankov & Popova, 2016). In addition to being an effective tool to address relational aggression, mediation enables adolescent girls to develop and make use of assertiveness and problem solving skills, which are linked to positive psychosocial outcomes (Flanagan et al, 2013). This further illustrates the value that the use of mediation may have. It can also be implemented as a restorative intervention method as part of restorative justice practices in school (Gonzalez, 2012).

4.4.4.1.3 Intervention from the school social worker

Participants suggested intervention from the school social worker as an intervention strategy to address relational aggression. Participants did not specify what type of intervention they would want the school social worker to offer, but expressed the need for the school social worker to be available when they need to talk. Some participants, however, did not feel that the school social worker was available enough and suggested that their school employ more than one social worker.

“Maybe ma'am the school social worker could, like, call us to sit down face to face and talk about it and talk through it.” (Participant 5)

“Uhm, I think you, uhm, there should be more than one social worker.” (Participant 17)

These findings concur with current research identifying individual therapeutic intervention as an intervention strategy that could be effective in addressing relational aggression (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). The negative psychosocial outcomes associated with being the victim or perpetrator of relational aggression (Espelage, et al, 2018; Wigderson & Lynch, 2013; Marshall et al, 2015), suggest that adolescent girls who have been the victim or the perpetrator of relational aggression may benefit from therapeutic intervention as well (Byers, Mishna & Solo, 2019). Whether adolescents want to come for therapeutic intervention because of their experiences relational aggression or because of the negative psychosocial consequences they might be suffering due to experiences of relational aggression, therapeutic intervention seems to be an intervention strategy that could be effective.

4.4.4.1.4 Peer mediation

Some participants suggested peer mediation as an intervention strategy to address relational aggression. This is a program that was already being implemented by the school social worker in the school where the research was conducted and the participants seemed to experience it as being an effective intervention strategy. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

“I think that peer mediating is very good, because they are helping aggression on the playground” (Participant 3)

“It's good that there's peer mediators and people can go to them” (Participant 10)

These findings concur with existing research which emphasises the need for peer mediation in schools (Calbreath & Crews, 2011). Research has found that peer mediation is an effective method of addressing and preventing conflict between adolescent girls within the school context. It is also a restorative intervention method which can be implemented as part of schools' restorative justice practices (Benson & Benson, 1993; Schrumpp, Crawford & Bodine, 1997; Thompson and Smith, 2011). According to Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (Erikson,

1968), adolescents' peer groups become more important to them than their relationships with adults (Louw & Louw, 2010) and it is thus understandable that some adolescent girls may prefer to have relational aggression addressed by someone from their peer group instead of having a mediation session facilitated by an adult.

While some of the participants are of the opinion that disciplinary action, intervention from the school social worker, mediation, and peer mediation could be affective in addressing relational aggression between adolescent girls, other participants do not want staff to become involved when they are the victim or perpetrator of relational aggression. This is explored below.

4.4.4.1.5 No intervention from staff at school

There were some participants who expressed that they do not want staff to become involved when they are the victim or the perpetrator of relational aggression. These participants were of the opinion that the teacher would either make the situation worse or wouldn't do anything to address the situation. Other participants felt that intervention by staff at school wouldn't be effective in addressing relational aggression between adolescent girls.

“Ma'am I would deal with it on my own or ask my mother for advice. I wouldn't come to the staff at school.” (Participant 4)

“I don't know because I never really told the teacher about what happened... I'd rather want to deal with it myself, than get teacher involved because then it's gonna get even bigger.” (Participant 9)

“Honestly, I tell, if I have a problem and I tell my teacher, she doesn't do anything about it. But what I wanted to do, I wanted to speak to them and give them advice. I wanted to tell them: ‘Look, there's all this gossiping and all this stuff, it's wrong.’” (Participant 12)

Some participants had the perception that staff would make incidents of relational aggression worse or wouldn't do anything at all. These findings highlight the influence that adolescent girls' perceptions of staff have on their likeliness to seek assistance from them. This is echoed by existing research stating that intervention by staff is more effective if adults within the school environment are perceived as being approachable, alert, helpful in meeting the needs of student and contribute to creating a culture of mutual care, support and advocacy amongst

children (Young et al, 2011). The section below presents the participants' perceptions on how relational aggression may be prevented in schools.

4.4.4.2 Preventing relational aggression in the school context.

Participants made suggestions for intervention that could prevent relational aggression from occurring in the school context. Three suggestions were mentioned most. The first of these was that it could be prevented by launching anti-bullying campaigns. Secondly, participants felt that having staff become involved when incidents of relational aggression occur could prevent future incidents. A number of the participants also felt that relational aggression could be prevented by schools having consequences in place for relational aggression, as there are for physical aggression in the school context. There were, however, a few participants who felt that relational aggression cannot be prevented in the school context.

“Put up 'no bullying' signs or sorting bullies out. Like, telling them, or even telling their parents. Because talking isn't, it's not going to work. Phoning their parents and telling them, look here, your child is a bully and he's bullying people, or she. Then they will stop.”
(Participant 12)

“It can be prevented by, if one girl is talking about another girl they should tell her to stop because it's not right. And if they still carry on, they know they will, there has to be one who will tell them there is consequences that's going to happen if they keep on going around and telling about the gossiping.” (Participant 5)

“Actually, I don't know because there's nothing we can do because it's got so out of control already.” (Participant 18)

These findings correspond with existing research suggesting that relational aggression is something that most adolescent girls will experience (James et al, 2011). Preventing relational aggression thus does not seem to be a realistic goal. It may be more realistic to aim to decrease relational aggression. Existing research supports the current findings, suggesting that relational aggression can be decreased through school wide programs aimed at educating students about

relational aggression, classroom interventions to decrease relational aggression and making efforts to change individual attitudes about relational aggression (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010; Nixon & Werner, 2010). It can be argued that relational aggression can be decreased most effectively through focussing intervention on the different systems adolescent girls form part of in the school context.

The participants had clear ideas about how they would want staff to address relational aggression in the school context. It was thus important to explore their ideas in terms of intervention strategies that they would implement if they had the opportunity to address relational aggression.

4.4.4.3. Intervention strategies designed by participants.

The majority of participants suggested care circles as intervention strategies to address relational aggression in the school context. Participants felt that this would assist them, as some teachers already have care circles in class, which participants experienced as being effective in addressing relational aggression. Some participants didn't use the words 'care circles', but rather described the care circles that they had been part of in their classes.

“Like, care circles to talk about everybody's things and how they're doing at their home and stuff like that.” (Participant 19)

“Like, every snack break then you sit in a big circle and then we play games and we, like, talk. That helped my class a lot. Where we're just all together. We just spent time together.” (Participant 16)

“Mostly care circles cause then everyone opens up.” (Participant 4)

Some participants also suggested putting up posters to educate children about relational aggression and doing role plays as possible intervention strategies. Participants felt that these strategies would aid in raising awareness about relational aggression in school. Overall, the participants highlighted their need for having relational aggression addressed as a serious issue within the school context and not simply as a normal occurrence between adolescent girls.

“I would take all the girls into the hall and make them talk to each other. And talk to the people that you don't like, and tell them what you don't like about, about what that person is doing to you. And just stop and not be friends, but just be okay with each other.” (Participant 4)

“I would let all the children that got kicked out of the groups, that have been bullied, into one room and ask them how they felt. And talk to the other children and ask them why you did it and make all the children aware that it's not okay to bully. It's not okay to hurt someone's feelings and that could be what decreases it.” (Participant 18)

These findings further underline the importance of putting intervention strategies in place to address relational aggression in the school context. Adolescent girls seem to have the need for relational aggression to be addressed. Numerous participants suggested care circles as a possible intervention strategy. Care circles have been found to be effective in enabling the deepening of friendships, creating safe spaces for adolescent girls, creating a space to express genuine emotion, cultivating empathy and as a means to address and solve conflict between peers (Levine and Tamburrino, 2014; Schumacher, 2014). An intervention plan using care circles as a tool could thus be effective in addressing relational aggression within the school context. As mentioned earlier in this objective, existing research also supports school-wide intervention programs aimed at educating adolescents about relational aggression as effective strategies to address relational aggression schools (Nickerson, 2010). Considering that adolescent girls' suggestions have been proven to be effective by existing research, it may be valuable to consider their suggestions and opinions when developing programs to address relational aggression in schools.

In summary, participants felt that staff could address relational aggression through having disciplinary measures in place, making use of mediation, intervention by the school social worker and peer mediation. Some participants, however, did not want staff to become involved in addressing relational aggression at school. Although it might not be realistic to prevent relational aggression, it could be decreased through school wide programs, classroom interventions and changing individual attitudes about relational aggression. Additionally, the

participants suggested care circles as intervention strategies to address relational aggression. They also suggested that schools create awareness about relational aggression and educate children about this phenomenon.

4.5 Conclusion

The findings provide an overview of the participants' perceptions of relational aggression and how they perceive it influences their lives. It was clear that the majority of participants had both witnessed and experienced relational aggression. The experiencing of relational aggression seemed to have a profound influence on the general well-being of the participants. Despite this, most of them admitted to being the perpetrator in addition to having been the victim of relational aggression. Relational aggression might not be preventable, but participants highlighted their need for it to be addressed as a serious issue within the school context. The final chapter consists of conclusions and recommendations for this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter of the dissertation presents the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study. These conclusions will be discussed under each research objective. This will be followed by the researcher's recommendations to the Western Cape Education Department and the research site to address relational aggression. The researcher will also make recommendations for future research and end the chapter with a conclusion.

5.2 Conclusions

The conclusions are presented below.

5.2.1 Objective One: The participants' understanding of what relational aggression means.

It can be concluded that participants could not define relational aggression, but were able to provide examples of it after the definition was provided to them. This speaks to a lack of accessible information about relational aggression at the school where the research was conducted. This is concerning, as it is evident from the findings that relational aggression is a frequent occurrence in the school context. This may be because the school context provides adolescent girls with the opportunity to interact with each other on a daily basis, often unsupervised.

In providing a description of what relational aggression entails, a number of behaviours were described. These include exclusion, gossiping, spreading rumours, threatening each other, judging and giving each other dirty looks. These descriptions are in line with international research conducted with adolescents from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, thus suggesting that relational aggression may be a universal phenomenon.

It can further be concluded that participants regard relational aggression as a serious issue in their daily lives and within the school context. This was reflected in the high ratings they assigned to the severity of relational aggression within the school context.

5.2.2 Objective Two: Participants' personal experiences of relational aggression.

Participants had been the victims of relational aggression in addition to witnessing it between peers at school. They experienced behaviours ranging from rumours being spread about them to peers gossiping about them and being excluded from peer groups. These were the same behaviours they witnessed occurring between other peers. The behaviours they experienced were also in line with existing research, once again highlighting the seemingly universal nature of relational aggression.

It can be deduced from the findings that participants' experiences of being the victim of relational aggression were associated with very powerful feelings which included sadness, anger, feelings of loneliness and isolation. These strong emotional responses evoked by experiencing relational aggression further emphasise the seriousness of relational aggression in the lives of adolescent girls. Relational aggression had a relatively lasting negative influence on the emotional well-being of the participants, and this speaks to why it is important for this phenomenon to be addressed.

It can further be concluded that participants used a wide range of coping mechanisms to deal with the negative emotions evoked by being the victim of relational aggression. These include listening to music, talking to peers, talking to maternal figures, avoidance techniques and emotional eating. Participants thus made use of both effective and less effective strategies to cope with the negative emotions associated with experiencing relational aggression.

Participants were both the victims and perpetrators of relational aggression. The participants were all adolescents, a developmental phase in which identity formation is a key development milestone. Being both the victim and the perpetrator of relational aggression was thus indicative of them experimenting with different identity roles, a normal occurrence during the adolescent phase of development.

While the above mentioned conclusion speaks to the reasons for participants becoming the perpetrators of relational aggression, this phenomenon, from the perspectives of the participants, occurs as a means to gain social power within peer groups or cope with feelings of jealousy towards peers. In contradiction to existing research, relational aggression does not occur due to boredom or a need for excitement in the lives of the participants.

The influence of relational aggression carries beyond the school corridors and into the family systems that the participants form part of. Incidents of relational aggression that occurred at school were carried over into adolescents' homes and their family systems through the use of social media. This speaks to the way in which peer relationships, a factor that forms part of the microsystem of an adolescents' environment, can have an influence on the family system, another factor forming part of the microsystem.

5.2.3 Objective Three: Participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being.

It is evident from the findings that relational aggression had contradicting influences on the participants' relationships with their peers. Relational aggression caused conflict and tension within friendships, detracted from trust and contributing to friendships ending. Contradicting this, working through the conflict caused by relational aggression resulted in stronger friendships for some participants. This suggests that relational aggression can have a seemingly constructive outcome in the lives of the participants. All of these paradoxical points speak to the very complex nature of this phenomenon.

Relational aggression had a negative influence on the academic functioning and academic progress of participants. It negatively influenced their ability to concentrate on their academic work during class time, as discussions about incidents of relational aggression that occurred outside the class context continued between peers during class. Their inability to focus on their academic work negatively influenced their ability to perform optimally at school. Changes or conflict in their social system thus influenced their academic lives.

Relational aggression also had a negative influence on the participants' self-esteem, making them feel like they are not good enough or need to change in accordance with what their peers expect of them. The negative influence that relational aggression had on their self-esteem, in turn, negatively influenced their ability to do their best in school. This emphasises the bidirectional influence that different systems forming part of the participants' environments had on each other and allude to the complexity of the functioning of the participants. Relational aggression, academic functioning and self-esteem are experienced by participants as connected to each other in complex ways.

5.2.4 Objective Four: Recommendations to address relational aggression within the school context.

In making recommendations to staff on how to address relational aggression in school, participants wanted it to be addressed but not be made a bigger issue than it was. It can be concluded that participants view four interventions as having the most potential to effectively address relational aggressions in schools.

Disciplinary action in the form of addressing the perpetrator directly, having consequences in place for children who display relational aggression and contacting the perpetrator's parents is the first of the recommendations made by the participants to address relational aggression in schools. The school environment, relationships with teachers and parents all form part of the microsystem of the participants' lives. This conclusion highlights the importance of all three these factors working together in addressing relational aggression in the school context.

The participants secondly recommended that a safe environment be created where the victim has the opportunity to address the perpetrator directly. This can be done through the use of mediation, where a neutral party like a teacher or the school social worker, facilitates a discussion between the victim and the perpetrator of relational aggression

Intervention from the school social worker may also be effective in addressing relational aggression. It can be concluded that the participants need the social worker to be available when they wanted to talk about an incident of relational aggression, but felt that she was not available enough.

Peer mediation was a program already implemented in the school where the research was conducted and it can be deduced that the participants view this intervention method as being effective in addressing relational aggression in school.

In general, one can conclude that participants believed that staff could make a significant difference in addressing and managing relational aggression in schools. Staff at school are, however, believed to make the situation between peers worse at times, not being responsive when relational aggression is reported to them or not believed to be able to do anything to address the situation. It can thus appear that participants' perceptions of staff at school may influence the probability of them seeking support from them when they experience relational aggression.

Relational aggression is a phenomenon that most adolescent girls will experience. Preventing relational aggression is thus seemingly not a realistic goal. It could, however, be decreased by having staff at school address incidents of relational aggression, by there being consequences in place for the perpetrators of relational aggression, as there are for physical aggression, and by launching anti-bullying campaigns. One can argue that participants view intervention on individual-, class- and school wide levels as having the potential to decrease relational aggression. This further supports the argument that relational aggression could be decreased most effectively through focussing on the different systems that adolescent girls form part of in the school context.

The participants had clear ideas about interventions they would implement to address relational aggression in the school context if they were given the opportunity. From their perspectives, it can be suggested that care circles are an effective way of addressing relational aggression in schools. This conclusion carries significant weight, as the participants speak from experience, having had their teachers hold care circles in classes in the past. Participants would also implement awareness strategies to educate peers about relational aggression in addition to care circles. Overall, it can thus be concluded that the participants have the need for relational aggression to be addressed as a serious issue within the school context involving all the different systems they form part of at school.

5.3 Researcher's recommendations

The following are the researcher's recommendations for school where the research was conducted and for the WCED. The researcher is aware that she conducted the study at one school only, but it would be useful for the WCED to consider these recommendations for other schools.

5.3.1 Recommendations for the WCED

Education about relational aggression

Information about relational aggression could be made more accessible through incorporating it in the teaching curriculum that teachers have to follow. It may be considered to add information about relational aggression to the Life Orientation curriculum of children in Grade six and seven. One of the five main learning outcomes already included in the national curriculums for both grades is personal development. This outcome includes a focus on

developing healthy conflict management skills, mediation skills and withstanding peer pressure. Information about relational aggression is relevant to all of these topics and could be interwoven with these topics without needing to add more outcomes to an already full curriculum. It is also recommended that information about relational aggression be readily available on the website and social media platforms of the WCED in order to enable children and parents to easily have access to reliable information about this phenomenon.

School-wide intervention

It is recommended the social workers or psychologists that form part of the WCED cluster based support teams consider developing an intervention plan in order to address relational aggression in schools. School social workers or other members of school based support teams could be tasked with implementing these programs in schools, seeing as the cluster based support teams may not have the time or resources to do so in all schools themselves. If these staff members' workloads are too full to do so, they may consider approaching tertiary institutions to place social work- and psychology students at their schools for their practicums. These students may then be able to assist in implementing the intervention plan developed by the cluster based support team.

Support to schools

It is recommended that the social workers or psychologists forming part of the WCED cluster based support teams, be available to facilitate mediation sessions with peers when extreme incidents of relational aggression occur in schools without mental health professionals employed or in cases where the staff at school are unable to resolve the incident. It is also recommended that they be available to provide individual counselling to adolescents who may need it. Considering the high work load of members from the cluster based support teams, it is recommended that they partner with tertiary institutions to have social work- and psychology students placed in schools for their practicums. These students would then be able to deliver these services to schools under the supervision of the cluster based support teams.

5.3.2 Recommendations to the research site

Emotional support and mediation

It is recommended that members of the school-based support team develop an intervention plan in order to address relational aggression in the school context, the details of which are discussed

further below. It is recommended that the school social worker or psychologist be responsible for the implementation of such an intervention plan, as this is their area of speciality. Considering the high workload of these professionals in the school, it might be considered to have social work- and psychology students placed at the school for their practical experience as part of their university training or the school could partner with organizations working in the field. Specifically, these persons could be available to facilitate mediation sessions between adolescent girls when incidents of relational aggression occur. They could also have individual sessions with the victim, perpetrator or any of the bystanders who may need counselling after the incident.

Additionally, a letter box that is locked could be placed outside one of these persons' offices, with only them having keys to open the box. Children could then write letters about the problems they might be experiencing with relational aggression. The social worker or psychologist can then reply in letter form or, according to his/her discretion, schedule an individual session with the child.

Education about relational aggression

Information about relational aggression could be made more accessible through educating learners about this phenomenon within the class context. Considering that teachers have full schedules for their classes, it might be more realistic to incorporate this information as part of the Life Orientation curriculum as indicated above. It might also be considered to have the school social worker or psychologist present these sessions to the classes, as the teachers already have to prepare for all of their other subjects and might find it challenging to incorporate this into their programs as well. These sessions could include information about what relational aggression is, the negative consequences thereof, how it can be decreased between peers and how support can be accessed when you have experienced relational aggression.

Expectations for behaviour in schools

It is recommended that the school include information about relational aggression and its expectations in terms of this behaviour in the school's code of conduct. Included could be the definition of relational aggression and the consequences for a child in the school that displays behaviour associated with relational aggression in the school context. The code of conduct is generally provided to parents at the beginning of the academic year. They will thus also be

aware of the school's expectations in this regard. In addition to this, it is recommended that the school have an anti-bullying policy in place that is available on their website and is provided to and discussed with the staff, learners and parents at the beginning of each academic year. An anti-bullying policy sets clear expectations in terms of behaviours that are prohibited or discouraged in the school context. It also outlines required behaviour and promotes certain behaviours (Hall 2017). It is recommended that expectations related to relational aggression be included in such policies.

Care circles

Care circles should be held on a regular basis within the school context in order to enable adolescent girls to develop positive peer relationships and to address incidents of relational aggression. Care circles have been found to be an effective intervention strategy to explore and address relational aggression between adolescent girls (Levine and Tamburrino, 2014; Schumacher, 2014). It is recommended that class teachers facilitate care circles with the learners in their class. The school social worker and psychologist could provide teachers with basic training on how to facilitate care circles. In an effort to prevent this intervention from interfering with the academic program of the school, care circles could be held during assembly periods on how ever frequent basis the school decides.

School-wide intervention

It is recommended that the school consider launching school-wide community work projects which include intervention regarding relational aggression. The school social worker or psychologist, could develop a community work project within the school context, as both professions are trained in developing community work projects. Social work and psychology students are also required to develop community work projects as part of their university training. The school could thus contact tertiary institutions in order to have such students placed with them for their practical experience. These students could then develop community work projects based on the specific needs of the school.

Employing more support staff

It is recommended that the research site consider employing more support staff, like another social worker or psychologist. If this is not a financially viable option, it may be considered to

have social work- and psychology students doing their practicums at different times of the year placed at the school. In doing so, there will always be extra support available to children who have the need for intervention regarding incidents of relational aggression.

5.3.3 Recommendations for future research

There is very limited research around relational aggression in the South African context and there is thus a clear need for more research in this area.

This study focussed on a particular school in an urban setting. Future research could improve on the current study by doing research in schools situated in both urban and rural settings, exploring whether differing settings may influence relational aggression between peers.

The sample of this study was quite homogenous and so future research exploring relational aggression and its influence on the well-being of adolescents with a diverse sample in terms of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds may be valuable. The current study also made use of a limited number of participants. Future research could thus improve on this study by making use of a larger number of participants. As the current study focussed solely on relational aggression between girls, it may be valuable for future research to explore relational aggression between boys.

Staff at schools play an integral role in addressing relational aggression between adolescent girls. Future research focussing on their views and experiences with relational aggression between pupils in school may thus be valuable too. A comparison between schools who have intervention strategies in place to address relational aggression and those who do not could prove the value of intervention strategies within the school context.

The current study found that social media is used to continue with behaviours associated with relational aggression beyond the school context. It might be valuable for future research to explore in more depth the role that social media possibly plays in relational aggression.

Lastly, the current study addressed how relational aggression influences peer relationships, academic progress and self-esteem. Findings alluded to relational aggression possibly having an influence on family functioning and family relationships. This is an area that could be addressed by future research by including family members as participants in the research study.

5.4 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore adolescent girls' perceptions of relational aggression and its influence on their well-being. Twenty girls in Grade six and seven in a school in the Western Cape were selected to participate in the study. The findings of the study were interpreted through the lenses of Psychosocial Development Theory and Ecological Systems theory and was informed by existing literature. This study highlighted the seriousness of relational aggression as an issue in the lives of adolescent girls and the detrimental influence of relational aggression on their lives. Findings also emphasised the need for intervention to be done in order to address relational aggression between adolescent girls within the school context. Recommendations were provided to address the issue of relational aggression in schools.

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Appendix A

Parent information leaflet and consent form

Dear parent,

I am the social worker at Sunlands Primary School and am currently doing my Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work at the University of Cape Town. As part of this program, I am required to do a research project. I would like to invite your daughter to participate in this project. I am interested in exploring how adolescent girls experience relational aggression in the school context and the influence that it has on their well-being. Relational aggression consists of behaviours intended to harm another person by manipulating or damaging their relationships or experiences of acceptance, group inclusion or friendship (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

If you provide consent for your child to participate in this project, I will have one interview of approximately 30-45 minutes with her. All participants will remain anonymous and none of their personal information will be known by anyone but me. All of the information received will also be handled confidentially and will only be used for the purpose of this project. The interview will take place at school and will not interfere with your daughter's academic program.

This project is important, as relational aggression is a phenomenon that exists within many adolescent friendships and has been proven to have an influence on their general well-being. Doing this research will enable Sunlands Primary School to explore different ways of addressing it in the school context. There is no foreseeable risk in participation, but counselling will be available at school should any participant need additional support after the interview.

This project has been approved by the University of Cape Town Ethics Committee and by the Western Cape Department of Education.

Your consent for your daughter's participation will be greatly appreciated. Once signed, please send this form back to school before 16/08/2019.

Kind regards,

Zuane Nieuwenhuizen

Parental Consent Form

**By signing below, I.....give
consent for my child.....to
participate in the above mentioned research project.**

Signed at (place).....on (date).....

.....

Parent signature

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1. Introduction to study and definition of what relational aggression means

2. Demographic details

2.1 Age

2.2 Grade

2.3 Family composition (Who does the child live with; Who are the child's primary caregivers)

3. What are the participants' understanding of what relational aggression means?

3.1 What have you heard about relational aggression?

3.2 What does relational aggression look like to you?

3.3 What are your thoughts on whether this happens at the school?

3.4 Please share some stories of relational aggression that you have seen happening between girls at the school?

4. What are the participants' personal experiences of relational aggression?

4.1 If you have experienced relational aggression, tell me about these experiences.

4.2 What were your feelings about these experiences?

4.3 How long would you say these feelings lasted?

4.4 How did you deal with these feelings?

4.5. What would you say is your part, if any at all, in these situations?

4.6 If you have not experienced relational aggression, what are your feelings about relational aggression in general?

4.7 What do you think are the reasons why girls behave like this towards each other?

5. What are the participants' perceptions of the influence that relational aggression has on their general well-being?

5.1 What have you heard about general well-being?

(A definition of general well-being will be provided to participants and the following areas related to the definition will be explored.)

5.2 How do you think relational aggression influences your ability to do your best in your school work?

5.3 How do you think relational aggression can influence your relationships with friends?

6. What recommendations would the participants make to the school to address relational aggression within the school context?

6.1 What do you feel the staff at the school can do to deal with relational aggression?

6.2 Where it to happen to you, what could the staff or learners do to help you manage relational aggression?

6.3 What are your thoughts on how relational aggression can be prevented from happening?

6.4 If you were asked to solve this problem in the school, how would you go about doing this?

Appendix C

Example of a transcription

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Nieuwenhuizen

INTERVIEWEE: Participant 3

DATE: 10/10/2019

LOCATION: School

INTERVIEWER: Alright, alright, so I'm gonna ask you quite a few questions okay and we're going to be about half an hour long, OK? It's very important that you're just honest and know your name isn't going to be used at all in our interview so you can just tell me what's really happening cuz then it helps me to better understand it and to actually know the truth right? And everything is like voluntary which means you don't have to answer the questions if you don't want to. OK? Good. Perfect. First questions I'm going to ask you are the basic ones which I already know but you have to say it so how old are you?

PARTICIPANT: I'm 11, turning 12 in November.

INTERVIEWER: OK good, and grade?

PARTICIPANT: 6.

INTERVIEWER: Right, and who lives with you in your house?

PARTICIPANT: It's my mom, my dad, my brother and me.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and who is your favourite person?

PARTICIPANT: I don't have one.

INTERVIEWER: You don't have a favourite?

PARTICIPANT: No.

INTERVIEWER: OK so, have you ever heard of relational aggression?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I have.

INTERVIEWER: What have you heard about it?

PARTICIPANT: I have heard that people argue and things can get very ugly.

INTERVIEWER: OK, things can get very ugly, ja, so relational aggression can be arguing, but it's basically anything that negatively influences social status so anything that makes you feel bad or makes you feel like you're not as good as the other kids or ... whatever, so it can be gossiping, it can be name calling, it can be spreading rumours, it can be like excluding someone like maybe they're not allowed to sit with you, it can be those looks, you know, that girls give to each other and you know exactly what that look means, right? So it can be all those things it's just about the way it makes you feel, makes you feel not good enough, does that make sense OK? OK, good. OK, I've mentioned a lot of examples, now what does it look like in your life? What have you seen?

PARTICIPANT: It's mainly been about my friends, they've been arguing a lot, my best friend and one of my other best friends. I was in the middle of it, it was very confusing.

INTERVIEWER: OK, all right so there's been a lot of arguing. So they argue in front of each other or like behind each other's backs?

PARTICIPANT: Arguing in front of each other and talking behind each other's backs.

INTERVIEWER: OK so that's the biggest thing that you are seeing? In your life?

PARTICIPANT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK. And do you think it happens here at school?

PARTICIPANT: It happens here at school, they will argue here for a whole day, I think it was either term 1 or term 2.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so maybe you can tell me about that. Later I'm going to ask about you yourself where ... if it's happened to you or you've done it but right now I want to know maybe if you've seen it with friends, with other kids, if maybe you can share some stories.

PARTICIPANT: OK, I can ... I remember, I think it was in Grade 4, and my cousin he was [inaudible], I didn't know what was happening or anything but they were

arguing and I then ... I don't know, ma'am, then he had a big mark on his face.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: I felt really sorry for him and then I felt really bad.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Was there any of that that happened behind his back? And people were-

PARTICIPANT: I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Cuz relational aggression, remember, is kind of stuff that happens like this, it's normally stuff in the background, so gossiping and spreading rumours and that type of thing. Have you seen any of that happening, like with your friends or in your life?

PARTICIPANT: It's sad, so there's this girl, and my friends, they don't like her, they say that she's rude and bossy.

INTERVIEWER: OK. And how do they say that?

PARTICIPANT: They say like she's rude and irritating, she's very bossy and rude to people.

INTERVIEWER: Do they say to her or do they say it-?

PARTICIPANT: Ja, behind her back.

INTERVIEWER: OK, OK, anything else that you've seen happen?

PARTICIPANT: I remember that my friend was supposed to play with my other friend. And she didn't, she didn't, I think she forgot cuz it was her birthday I think, so she didn't play with her and they were very angry with each other and they ran off.

INTERVIEWER: OK, all right, and then your class, have you seen anything in your class?

PARTICIPANT: I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Is that OK, all right, good, OK so now I want to ask about you specifically. So if you've ever experienced it yourself either spread rumours about you, gossiped about you, excluded you, made you feel bad or you did to somebody else, if you can maybe share those stories with me.

PARTICIPANT: Actually my two closest friends now, they're always excluding me. I don't know why. And I think they do talk behind my back.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

PARTICIPANT: Because they're always excluding me and make me feel very bad.

INTERVIEWER: Ja, how does it happen, if you can describe it to me?

PARTICIPANT: Well we always used to hang out together on weekends and things like that ..

INTERVIEWER: Yes

PARTICIPANT: When it's not exams, and it's the end of the term and they're always leaving me out.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so they're hanging out alone?

PARTICIPANT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and, OK ja...

PARTICIPANT: And, and it seems like they're ignoring me

INTERVIEWER: Right. And then you like talk to them about it straight up or not?

PARTICIPANT: No I haven't.

INTERVIEWER: OK, why do you think that is?

PARTICIPANT: No, it's just me who can be friendly.

INTERVIEWER: OK

PARTICIPANT: I don't want to start any trouble.

INTERVIEWER: OK, you don't want to start any trouble. And is there anything else ever happen that you feel like you want to share?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I've been bullied a lot by this girl. We were friends but I don't know what is happening because she was always being rude and she punched me once.

INTERVIEWER: Shoo!

PARTICIPANT: And so, and so I just told her I don't want to be friends with her anymore, because, because she's being very mean, and now that we're older, we actually, we came - we're sort of sort of friends, but we're fine now.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: Because we sorted things out.

INTERVIEWER: Is it difficult for you to talk about this stuff?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, it is a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, why?

PARTICIPANT: Because I felt very bad, because I was very close with her.

INTERVIEWER: OK. And when did it. all of it ... happen with this girl?

PARTICIPANT: She started from Grade 1 onwards.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. That's been a long time, has your friendship been up and down or-or how's it been?

PARTICIPANT: It's been, it's been a really rough road.

INTERVIEWER: OK. And what of those things have happened, those relational aggression things have happened in this friendship?

PARTICIPANT: So she's been arguing with my other friends, she's been lying a lot.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so she's lying behind your back or-?

PARTICIPANT: No, she's like lying in front of me.

INTERVIEWER: In front of you - to you?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, and to my other friends.

INTERVIEWER: And so what are your feelings about this stuff, now with your two friends, with this other friend, how does it make you feel?

PARTICIPANT: It makes me feel quite sad actually. I feel very bad for them.

INTERVIEWER: For them?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, because I don't know what they going through.

INTERVIEWER: OK, tell me a little bit more?

PARTICIPANT: I want to help them but I don't know what to do.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so do you feel like you feel bad for them for the way they are acting?

PARTICIPANT: Because there'll be like something is wrong and I will try to help them.

INTERVIEWER: Now, how does it make you feel when they exclude you, whatever?

PARTICIPANT: Makes me feel quite bad.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: Because I've never been through something like this before. There's always going to be three of us, so it's quite odd.

INTERVIEWER: Quite odd. All right. And for how do ... how long do these feelings last if you feel this bad feeling, right? How long does it last for?

PARTICIPANT: It bugs me a lot though. Sometimes I'm very sad the whole day

INTERVIEWER: OK. So it doesn't go away it's every day that you feel, that you feel like that. Shoo. And you say sometimes you feel bad the whole day?

PARTICIPANT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And so there will be certain parts of the day that are harder than other parts.

PARTICIPANT: I think it's the break, the breaks.

INTERVIEWER: OK, all right. And how do you handle it, how you do handle these feelings?

PARTICIPANT: I will go and play with other groups and I will talk with them sometimes so then catch up.

INTERVIEWER: All right. And when you're feeling bad, how do you, how do you ... kind of help yourself, when you're feeling bad?

PARTICIPANT: I will usually play with other people.

INTERVIEWER: All right. And is there anything in general that you do when you feel really bad to make yourself feel better?

PARTICIPANT: I always speak to my mom.

INTERVIEWER: OK, you talk to your mom. OK, so has there ever been a situation where you were the one, that was doing the gossiping, or spreading the rumours?

PARTICIPANT: I think yes because like a big confusion because of... they said that most people didn't like this one girl's mom, and she said, she invited me to her house but her mom said, that she didn't want, that I couldn't eat the food, I had to bring my own food, or else I had to eat peanut butter and bread. It was very shocking, and I told my mom, and my mom said I shouldn't go, go and when I asked if she wanted to come to me, her mom said that I could only come to her, she can't come to me because no-one can takes care of her like she does.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. And so what did you do then, that would be relational aggression?

PARTICIPANT: So I told my friend then that now it was her birthday, she wanted to invite her, she couldn't come, there was lots of confusion...

INTERVIEWER: OK, so you told your friends about this, this that happened. Have you ever done anything else?

PARTICIPANT: I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: All right. And so what do you think is the reason that girls act like this towards each other?

PARTICIPANT: I think one of the main reasons is jealousy.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: But my mom always tells me this and even with my cousin, we as family is very competitive and then we try to compare our marks, it makes me feel very bad and I feel very confused because you shouldn't compare each other.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so do you think that comparison happens here at school too, between the girls?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, because, my one friend, her name is Jordan, she always mess with boys and other girls, and she plays soccer, and she's usually the goalkeeper, and Annabella and them, they're twins, so the friends always compare them and it makes her feel very bad. I remember one morning not too long ago when she was actually crying, they hurt her so much.

INTERVIEWER: Oh no, that's terrible. OK, so the next part of the interview that we're gonna have is, I'm gonna ask you a little bit about wellbeing, OK? Do you know what wellbeing is?

PARTICIPANT: My wellbeing? Like I'm taking care of myself, like making sure I get my clothes washed and made.

INTERVIEWER: Ja, so wellbeing is like how it's going with you. So for instance, let's say you are living in a house, and you've got parents, and you've got money for food, and you've got a school to go to and you've got some friends and it's going OK with you at school, then your feeling of wellbeing is probably going to be higher, right? If, there's a war outside, you don't have a house, you don't have any money for food, you can't come to school, you don't have any friends, then your feeling of wellbeing is probably going to be lower. Does that make sense? OK, good. So, school makes up part of your wellbeing, so what I want to know is, how do you think relational aggression influences you or other girls' ability to, you know, do your best in school?

PARTICIPANT: Well I think it does affect what happens in the home and school work, because a rumour went around about a girl ...

INTERVIEWER: Yes?

PARTICIPANT: That she was getting 56% for her overall average and I'm not sure about it.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: ...but I feel very bad for her, they say there's something happening at home, and I'm not sure about that.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and so how do you think that will impact on her ability to do her best?

PARTICIPANT: I think with spreading rumours about her makes her feel very sad.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Have you ever felt like, all of these things that's happening with your friends and your work ... like influences your ability to really do your best in school?

PARTICIPANT: It kind of does, and October's a really sad month for me.

INTERVIEWER: How so?

PARTICIPANT: Because I lost my grandmother.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sorry to hear that. OK. So do you bring that up now because that kind of, those feelings and stuff make it harder for you here at school?

PARTICIPANT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'm sorry to hear that. It's really difficult when you go through, go through stuff like this and, and it's OK for you to be sad and that's why we are here at school, to be there for you, so when you need it, Mrs. Grant will be there, you know, if you need to talk, OK? All right? OK, and so how do you think relational aggression influences your friendships?

PARTICIPANT: Well, we're growing very far apart, not as well as we used to be.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: And my birthday's coming up and I think she's forgotten my birthday.

INTERVIEWER: You think she forgot your birthday? OK. Right. And you mentioned earlier that like your friendships were also up and down a lot, is that still happening or-or ...

PARTICIPANT: Not any more.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and how are, how are other ways that you think that this gossiping, spreading rumours and stuff can impact on your friendships, or are impacting on your friendships?

PARTICIPANT: Well, I think it's really making people angry, it's driving us apart.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: And don't see each other as much anymore.

INTERVIEWER: OK. OK, and now the last part of the questions I want to ask you is about what could be done to like, improve the situation or solve the problem right? So the first question I have is what do you think of the staff here at school, so it'd be me and Mrs. Grant, and the teachers, Mrs. Van Heerden, everybody, what can we do to deal with relational aggression in the school?

PARTICIPANT: I think the peer mediating is very good, because they are helping aggression on the playground.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so we're talking relational aggression, the stuff that happens behind the scenes, the rumour spreading and that stuff, what do you think we adults can do to deal with it?

PARTICIPANT: Not really sure.

INTERVIEWER: OK. That's fine, all right. And if it were to happen to you, like it's happening now, to you and your friends, right, how can we help you manage that relational aggression that's happening between your friends?

PARTICIPANT: I think maybe I'm just going to stay away from them.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: Though I'll still talk to them.

INTERVIEWER: But what can we as the people working at the school, do to help you manage these situations?

PARTICIPANT: I think you could like maybe can sort it out.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and how, what would that look like? What, how would we do that?

PARTICIPANT: Maybe a care circle?

INTERVIEWER: OK.

PARTICIPANT: Of girls and boys.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Tell me about care circles?

PARTICIPANT: We all talk about our feelings and emotions.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so you think that would work for like you and your friends?

PARTICIPANT: Think so.

INTERVIEWER: And how do you think we can prevent it from happening at school, what are your thoughts on how to prevent it?

PARTICIPANT: I think maybe we should, maybe there should be more peer mediators? And... not really sure if I'd add anything.

INTERVIEWER: OK, well that's perfect. And now the second last question I'm going to ask you is, if we were to ask you to design a project, right, to solve this problem

in the school, solve relational aggression as a problem in the school, what would you do?

PARTICIPANT: I think I'll do the care circle.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so how would you do it?

PARTICIPANT: Maybe, like outside on the field... then Tuesday, Thursday every week, they all get together and us talk about our feelings and our school things, and give out some compliments and advice.

INTERVIEWER: OK, will it be big groups or little groups, how would you do it?

PARTICIPANT: Maybe it would be a big group but not too big, so maybe more smaller.

INTERVIEWER: OK, all right, OK. So then maybe the last question I have for if you had to rate, let's say 1 is that relational aggression isn't an issue at all, in our school, all right, and 10 is it's a crisis, it's a huge issue. Which one would you choose?

PARTICIPANT: I think it's more 1. You don't see it often on the playground.

INTERVIEWER: OK. So it's a 1. You don't see a problem. OK. All right, then we are finished. OK.