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## **Teachers' perceptions of female student aggression at an all-girls school**

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### **Abstract**

There has been limited research into how teachers view and respond to relational aggression in girls. The existing research is largely quantitative and questionnaire based and has indicated that gender stereotypes may influence teachers' perceptions of female aggression. The present study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to explore how seven teachers (six females and one male) working in a single sex (all girls) school, experienced and perceived female student aggression. The results were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and three themes were identified: the physicality of female aggression, aggression as the presence or absence of control, and community: aggression as a means of expressing belonging. These themes were discussed in the context of the need for a new language of female aggression, which promoted a genuine language of assertion for girls and women.

**Key words:** Aggression; adolescence; girls; school; teachers; assertion

Existing research into teachers' views of aggression in females indicates that gender stereotypes may influence how it is perceived. Much of this research is, however, quantitative and questionnaire based, highlighting a need for qualitative perspectives. The present study, therefore, adopts a qualitative approach in order to explore how staff working in a single sex (all girls) school experience and perceive female aggression.

Research into aggression, defined here as “any behavior that is intended to hurt another person, oneself, or something” (Rohner, 1976, p. 59), has examined both direct and indirect aggression. Direct aggression is overtly aggressive acts carried out physically or verbally and, in this context, males are indicated as being more aggressive than females (e.g. Archer, 2004). Indirect aggression refers to hostile acts in which the perpetrator does not confront the victim directly but rather ignores, excludes or spreads rumours about the intended victim. This focus has challenged the “acceptance of the mythology of more benign childhoods for girls” (Zahn-Waxler, 1993, p. 84), with research indicating both that girls are more likely to use indirect rather than overt forms of aggression (e.g. Craig, 1998) and that it can have a significant negative impact on victims (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000a).

A distinction has also been made between social and relational aggression. Social aggression damages another's self-esteem or social status (Underwood, 2003), may be expressed using non-verbal behaviour (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2002), and can be distinguished from relational aggression by its non-confrontational elements (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Relational aggression, by contrast, is directly confrontational (Xie et al., 2002) and is focussed on harming the individual by damaging their relationships with others, particularly their peer group. Its prevalence and importance was indicated by Young, Boye, and Nelson (2006) who found that 71.4% of girls and 21.1% of boys experiencing victimisation in their study would not have been identified if relational aggression had not been measured.

Research indicates that this mode of aggression is predominantly used by girls (e.g. Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001), is the preferred mode for girls (Putallaz et al., 2007), and that this preference is observable by the time children reach pre-school (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). In addition, girls are indicated as being more likely than boys to be the victims of relational victimisation (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005).

Research, however, is not conclusive with regards the gender difference relating to relational and social aggression. Some research has found that boys scored higher than girls in both overt and relational aggression (Tomada & Schneider, 1997) and that girls and boys did not differ in how much relational aggression they reported (Woods & Wolke, 2003). Paquette and Underwood (1999) similarly concluded that both genders reported equal frequencies of social aggression, however, reported that girls thought about it more and were more distressed by it than boys. Some of these differences across studies may be explained by the differing ages of the participants, but overall the research indicates that there may be gender differences in the way that relational and social aggression is expressed and experienced.

Research into relational aggression in schools has highlighted a number of challenges. Firstly, teachers have been found to have difficulty identifying relational aggression (Young et al., 2006). Secondly, it is taken less seriously, subject to less intervention and results in less empathy for victims, compared with physical and verbal aggression, by both preservice (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006) and elementary school teachers (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). For example, Bauman and Del Rio (2006) examined the attitudes of preservice teachers and found that they would demonstrate the least empathy for incidences of relational bullying, would deem it as the least serious form of bullying and would be the least likely to intervene in a case of it. These results replicated those found by Yoon and Kerber (2003) in their survey of elementary teachers' attitudes and interventions with regards bullying. This survey

found that, when dealing with cases of social exclusion, the teachers would be less sympathetic, less likely to get involved, and more likely to just talk to the perpetrator and show leniency in their dealings with them.

Thirdly, while good consistency has generally been found between teacher and peer-report ratings of aggression (e.g. Putallaz et al., 2007) there are indications that the gender of students may influence teachers' perceptions. For example, Lancelotta and Vaughan (1989) noted that teacher ratings of peer social status correlated more with those of boys than with those of girls. In the context of the research indicating that gender may influence teacher ratings, Underwood, Galen and Paquette (2001) have raised the question of whether teachers may also be influenced by stereotypes when reporting levels of relational aggression in girls. They note that even very young children appear to be influenced by gender stereotypes when rating and responding to aggression and that adults, as more 'conversant' in these stereotypes, may be even more influenced by them. As a result, they may report the types of aggression expected of each gender i.e. relational for females and overt for boys, rather than the actual types of aggression that are displayed.

This might offer one reason for the relative discrepancy in ratings. Such attitudes may also help explain the observation, arising out of several pieces of research, that students do not rate teacher intervention into aggression as effective (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2005; Shute et al., 2002).

There has, however, only been limited research into how teachers view and respond to relational aggression in girls and much of this has been quantitative and questionnaire based (Owens et al. 2005). In one of the few qualitative studies to date, Owens and colleagues (2005) conducted focus groups with adolescent boys (n = 32) and girls (n = 40) as well as individual interviews with seven of their teachers to explore perceptions of aggression. While

there were some areas of agreement between the three groups e.g. in terms of the very negative impact of aggression on the victims and that the boys' aggression towards girls was often motivated by wishing to impress other boys or amuse themselves, there were also important differences. For example, the authors found that there were differences in the perception of the boys' verbal aggression towards the girls, with the boys viewing their behaviour as joking whereas the teachers and girls viewed it as verbally offensive and, at times, sexually harassing. This study highlights the importance of studying the perspectives of different groups in relation to aggression in order to begin to develop a comprehensive picture about the form, function and impact of aggression.

The research outlined above suggests that there may be gender differences in the ways that aggression is displayed, perceived, experienced and recorded and that these differences may be influenced, at least in part, by gender stereotypes. The research also highlights the need to obtain the perspectives of a range of people who experience aggression, such as teachers. There has, however, been a dearth of research exploring the lived experiences of teachers specifically in respect of female aggression. To address this gap in the literature, the present study adopts a qualitative approach in order to explore how staff, working in a single sex (all girls) school, experience and perceive female aggression.

### **Method**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological approach that is used to focus on the lived experiences of others, as accessed through their subjective reports and interpretation of these experiences (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). IPA was chosen as the most appropriate form of qualitative analysis for the study for a number of reasons. It authenticated the first author's involved role as an educationalist by validating the "central role for the analyst" and the "active role of the researcher" (Pringle, Drummond,

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McAfferty, & Hendry, 2011, p.20); and provided a way to do justice to the lived experiences of the individual participating professionals (Pringle et al., 2011)

## **Ethics**

The study received ethical approval from the authors' educational establishment

## **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from an inner-city school in the north-east of England. The school was single-sex (all girls) and the students were aged from 11 to 18. Any individual who was employed as a member of teaching staff at the school was eligible to participate. Potential participants were initially given an explanatory briefing about the study. This was followed by a recruitment e-mail to which participant information, consent form, and brief demographic questionnaire were attached. A total of 23 offers to participate were received and seven participants were initially selected in chronological order of their offer, as this was considered to be likely to be sufficient to uncover the key themes within the time constraints of the study. All interested persons were informed of this process.

## **Participants**

A sample of 7 participants (6 females, 1 male) took part in order to study the predefined area of interest i.e. the views of teachers working at a single sex (all girls) school about female aggression. All participants met the criteria of being teaching staff in a single sex (all girls) school. One participant identified as being 25 years of age or under, five as being in the 26-40 bracket and one as being over 56; one participant had been at the school between 1 and 2 years, one between 3 and 4 years and five had taught at the school for 5 or more years. Of the seven participants, six had previous experience of teaching in a mixed gender school.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author using a pre-prepared interview schedule (see Table 1) to help ensure that the questions remained relevant to the aim of the study, but allowed scope for exploration and were neutral rather than leading (Smith, 1995). Interviews took place at the participating school at a time convenient to the participant and took an average of 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participant quotes are identified by a number to protect anonymity.

Data analysis was carried out by the first author. The data analysis process was carried out following the guidelines of Smith and Osborne (2008). The first transcript was read and re-read before being annotated with notes, observation, summaries or interpretations. Emergent themes were then identified. Connections between these emergent themes were then sought resulting in the clustering of themes and the identification of superordinate themes. Only when this transcript was felt to be exhausted did the researcher move onto the next transcript and the same process was repeated. Particular care was taken to validate newly arising convergent and divergent themes. When each transcript had been analysed the superordinate themes were then examined in order to produce the 'master' themes which were felt to be representative of all of the interview material. To help ensure study rigour, the process and the emergent themes were discussed with the second author on an ongoing basis; reference back to the IPA quality evaluation guide provided by Smith (2011) was made regularly; the first author kept a reflexive diary and credibility feedback was obtained from the participants.

## **Results**

All participants identified that teenage girls could be aggressive and referred to witnessing behaviour reflecting a "*spectrum of aggression*" (P2). This included indirect, overt and relational aggression. Three thematic lenses were identified: physicality, control,



and community, which were united by the supra-ordinate theme of “the language of female aggression.” The latter refers to the fact that female aggression was commonly understood with reference to male aggression, rather than in its own terms.

**Physicality: Aggression as requiring physical manifestation or repression.**

The majority of participants referred to the physicality of female student aggression; “*it’s so much that it affects their breathing...it’s a very physical emotion*” (P3), particularly when linked to anger: “*you could see it physically rising in her and her chest would go red and her neck would go red and then, the ultimate anger was her face was red it was like a no-go area*” (P2). Other physical manifestations of aggression were recorded as “*huffing and puffing*”; “*storming off, slamming doors*”; “*pushing whatever there is out of the way*”; “*...and then there are tears. I think we get lots of tears.*” (P4). These physical manifestations, in particular crying, were explained in terms of frustration; “*their response is a physical reaction of ‘I don’t like this’ and ‘I don’t know how to contain what my body is wanting to do’*” (P4).

Whilst the teachers described the physical manifestations of aggression in girls, they also described them experiencing a gender-related tension with regards the acceptability of an overt exhibition of aggression directed towards another person: “*I think there’s lots of anger erm in girls and sometimes I think, because they’re girls and they think well, if boys were angry they’d have a fight but they just get angry and it builds up...*” (P2). Explicitly or implicitly participants made reference to gender stereotypes surrounding the physicality of aggressive behaviour: “*some girls, who are very like boys, [who] will actually take on the role of the boy...they’re just like ‘Yeah, come on then, I’ll have a fight’*” (P5). Overt displays of aggression were understood by the majority of participants as being a more “*‘boyish type of aggression’*” (P3) carried out “*to some extent by the ‘boys’ in school*” (P5). Physical

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aggression was also viewed as representing a loss of control: “*rash, kind of 0-60, ‘I’ve reached boiling point’ without even processing it*” (P3); with girls being seen as having to struggle hard not to hurt someone else: “*You can see that restraint when they’re struggling...because sometimes they wanna do it to somebody else but then they take it out on throwing a book or a blazer or hitting a door.*” (P3).

A clear gender distinction was, therefore, apparent or implicit in most responses, with physical aggression being viewed as more of a male than a female response. A tension for most participants existed in that the meaning of physical aggression was also viewed differently for girls and boys. In relation to boys: “*I don’t like seeing them fighting but sometimes a fight, it’s over and done with*” (P1). In relation to girls, one participant recounted a situation of one girl walking past another on the way to a lesson and punching her. When challenged both girls had reasoned “*they were friends, they were just messing on*” saying “*‘it was just a punch’*” (P2). The participant noted “*that was a characteristic that I would expect to see from a boy but that was very surprising for me*” (P2). The implicit sense of gender differences was further referred to when one participant noted that they thought a female member of staff would be more likely to witness a fight and think “*‘Woah, what is this?’*” whereas a male member of staff may witness it and “*just see a fight*” (P5). This suggests that males and females are viewed as both expressing and interpreting physical aggression in different ways. Aggression, therefore, becomes a potent way for an adolescent girl to reflect her identification, or lack of, with her own gender.

While male physical expression was seen to some extent as normal and reflecting a way of releasing tension, the teachers identified a number of potential factors that might influence whether girls expressed physical aggression or not. These explanations centred around alternative ways for the girls to reduce tension and deal with conflict, particularly for those who were less able to express themselves verbally: “*they were very physical. And I*

*think that was linked to their intellectual capacity... [They were] not very bright so they didn't articulate their aggression"* (P1). Aggression was also seen to result from the limited opportunities for physical play as girls became older: *"at Primary...you had this creativity and you got to run wild"* (P3) and sport: *"the girls who need it most don't get it"* (P6). Thus, it was viewed by the participants as unusual and 'male' for females to express physical aggression and the teachers felt that they had to look beyond the explanations provided for male physical aggression and rationalise female physical aggression in different ways.

**Control: Aggression as the presence and absence of control.**

As noted above, physical manifestations of aggression were perceived as demonstrating a lack of control on the part of the individual whereas, relational aggression was described in terms indicative of the aggressor being in control of her actions. Control could be manifested in the briefest of interactions with as little as *"the odd word"* or *"the hackie look"* [a local term used to refer to a look that conveys dislike] (P1). The "hackie look" featured in all participants' responses as *"being used in a way to make someone else feel uncomfortable"* (P2). Control was also described as the ability to *"make someone feel bad by saying something about them or giggling at them"* (P6) or *"pushing someone out of a group without the rest of the audience knowing"* (P5). The more indirect nature of this relational aggression was also frequently referenced: *"...so it's not directed directly at the person erm there's a lot of behind people's backs that goes on ...or they don't say exactly what they mean but they imply something"* (P7), or *"[they] will do it, kind of more slyly and more underhand and will do it on a one to one situation"* (P5). Here the control of the aggressor was seen as existing powerfully in the ambiguous and less visible nature of the aggression, because the teachers felt less able to observe it, label it unequivocally as aggression and, therefore, intervene effectively: *"they're quite clever at passing [the comments] under the radar"* (P1) or because, *"there's not corroborating evidence from other*

witnesses" (P5). There was also a recognition by the teachers that they had difficulty labelling this form of behaviour as aggressive, even when it occurred in their own interactions with students: "*we maybe don't give it the recognition of it being aggression we just say 'oh, they're being naughty' or 'they're being rude'*" (P4). This sense that "*they're not outlandishly being aggressive enough to warrant a consequence...but that gives them something in return*" (P3) would suggest students achieve their aim of control and that this may re-inforce their behaviour.

The teachers' experiences of controlled, indirect, and social aggression were described using negative language, which appeared to reflect their frustration at being unable to deal with it easily. The behaviour was described as, "*more slyly [carried out] and more underhand*" (P5) as well as "bitchy" (P6). The aggression was also described in terms of a game, with the students: "*pushing every single boundary, I think in an attempt to goad [the member of staff]*" (P4), with the recognition that if the member of staff responded by shouting, the students would report, "*'she's gan aka'*" [a local phrase used to indicate an extreme reaction or response to a situation by a teacher usually identifiable by excessive shouting] then "*...they've [the students] won*" (P4). This contrasted sharply with the more neutral descriptive, even legitimising terms, used to describe overt aggression. One explanation for this may be that overt aggression was understood to be the result of an escalated situation in which the student reacted and lost control rather than initiated intentioned action.

### **Community: Aggression as belonging.**

In this sub theme, the teachers identified a range of communities to which the students belonged and the differing norms relating to aggression within these communities. In this context, aggression was seen as a means of the individual expressing belonging to a particular

community, including on-line communities. There was a recognition that the teachers were potentially out of step with the norms, both in relation to the norms of social media: *"I think we're running behind them"* (P1) and wider societal norms: *"Or maybe mine's wrong. Like, maybe mine goes against, or maybe school's goes against what the general consensus about what acceptable behaviour is and we're now the exception."* (P4)

Many participants noted the complex interaction between aggression and community, noting that students whom they considered at risk or vulnerable with regards to expressing physical aggression in the classroom setting were successfully involved in Cadets programmes. These are programmes in the UK which are sponsored and supported by the Ministry of Defence. These groups meet at least weekly and provide opportunities for young people to take part in activities that challenge them to be more independent, confident and able to step up to any challenge: *"sometimes you just think, how do you get through cadets and the structure. You can't do it in school. And that interests me, how can they be so controlled in cadets?...if you look at the students who do cadets they are often the ones who can fire up. There are a lot of them who don't always control their behaviour in school."* (P7)

By choosing to belong to cadets, students demonstrated that they could modify or control their behaviour. Some of the comments made by participants suggested that without that sense of belonging, the stakes were not high enough to encourage control or modification and instead their aggressive behaviour became synonymous with their identity at school: *"[they] ... 'always kick off' or 'they always slam the door' ...and that's their identity...and without that maybe they wouldn't feel like they have a place in school."* (P7).

While some participants viewed the role of the school as being to: *"teach them [the students] another way of life"* (P1), other participants could see their students' behaviour as

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being consistent with that of adult females out with the school setting when dealing with confrontation: *"I think even adults, females, would prefer to just put it in an e-mail so they don't have to have face-to-face"* (P7) and further, that teachers had the potential to model inappropriate aggressive behaviours in school: *"you can cane them [students] verbally. A teacher can be really, really cruel"* (P1) or *"you do wonder how many times you've been unwittingly huffy with them or grumpy with them or a bit passive aggressive"* (P4).

There was also a recognition that gender influenced the way that female behaviour was perceived in all communities, irrespective of the specific social norms relating to aggression: *"it's that thing about...like if you're an assertive woman you're bossy.. if you're an assertive male you're assertive"* (P04). This was reflected in the discomfort of some participants of supporting their female students to be assertive: *"I think we probably err on the end of encouraging them not to be assertive, to sort of work collaboratively and to not have a pecking order"* (P2) and *"assertiveness is fine at the right time, at the right place, and in the right way"* (P7). Others, however, emphasised the importance of assertiveness: *"assertive to me is all about confidence and about...loving themselves and who they are and going out into the world being free to express their views and stuff"* (P5) and similarly, *"assertive enough to know when enough's enough and kind of speak up"* (P3), that sense of *"knowing where your boundaries are, knowing where your parameters are for who you are and how you're happy to act be treated"* (P3).

## Discussion

This study identified three lenses through which staff perceived adolescent teenage aggression: physicality, control, and belonging, which, when examined in the context of pre-existing research, confirms a need for a new language of female aggression.

### **Physicality and the language of aggression**

The first theme identified in the study, physicality, indicated that female physical aggression is understood with reference to male aggression, rather than in its own terms. This gendered view of aggression is consistent with research that indicates that gender plays a role in both social representations of aggression and social roles. In relation to the first, males have been found to hold a more instrumental or functional representation of aggression where it is viewed as a means of exerting interpersonal control. By contrast, females tend to have an expressive representation of aggression i.e. as reflecting a failure to control anger (see Campbell & Muncer, 1994 for an overview). In relation to social roles, research suggests that displays of aggression, particularly physical aggression by men is both part of their cultural script and serves the function of stabilising their gender identity when it is threatened (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Arzu Wasti, 2009). Thus, social representations of aggression in females are different to those of males and are reflected in a range of ways, including emotional reactions to, attitudes towards and causal explanations for female versus male aggression (Campbell, Muncer, Guy & Banim, 1996). This was evidenced by the participants, who viewed physical aggression as more typically male, more acceptable in males and as serving a different function in females as compared with males.

In the context of this previous research, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in the present study, physically aggressive girls were seen as being like boys; lacking in the ability to express emotions verbally and to effectively regulate their emotions. To monitor, evaluate and modify one's emotional world requires self-comprehension. This self-understanding can then be articulated to others but it relies on having a suitable linguistic framework from which to comprehend in the first place given that "the language we use to describe our experiences is crucial to our understanding of that experience" (Artz, 1998, p.103). The correspondence between effective emotional regulation and positive social-psychological

adjustment are well-documented (e.g. Schultz, Izard, & Bear, 2004), with some evidence to indicate that lower emotional regulation in girls is predictive of later aggression (Bowie, 2010). In turn, aggression that is perceived as being gender atypical, e.g. physical aggression in girls, has been linked to greater maladjustment (Crick, 1997), depression and lower self-esteem (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001), and lower peer acceptance (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Some research has, however, found that atypical behaviour risk existed for boys but not for the girls (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006).

One requirement for the constructive expression of emotion is the existence of a suitable linguistic framework (Artz, 1998). As Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005, p.351) note: "traditional gender role stereotyping has created a narrow range of behaviour options that allow young women to be angry." As long as there is a reliance on the language of male aggression to explain female physical aggression, girls and women may lack a language that is fully congruent with their experiences. This, in turn, makes it more difficult to fully understand the relative influence of different factors on the relationship between what is perceived as gender atypical aggression and negative social outcomes.

### **Aggression as a means for control**

The second theme identified in the study, control, suggested that the participants experienced the students as displaying relational aggression as a more controlled form of aggression. While relational aggression may be seen as more gender typical for females (Xie et al., 2002), research indicates that girls who engage in relational aggressive are also at risk of a range of negative outcomes including: depression, loneliness, anxiety, and rejection (e.g. Bowie, 2010; Schultz et al., 2004); social avoidance (Paquette & Underwood, 1999); borderline personality and bulimia (Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001). The fact that victims of aggression have been found to use relational aggression as a means of self-defence (Crick,



1995; Craig, 1998), further suggests a need to redefine the language of female aggression to acknowledge the blurring between “aggressor” and “victim” (Molidor, 1996).

The participants in the present study acknowledged a difficulty in intervening with relational aggression, partly because of its more hidden nature and perceived lack of seriousness when compared with physical aggression. This is consistent with research by Hurd and Gettinger (2011) who found that 83% of mothers and teachers indicated that they would intervene immediately for a physically aggressive act, with only 10% indicating they would do so if witnessing relational aggression. Not only may this lead to relational aggression being “unnoticed” (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001), but would also indicate that females have fewer options in respect of being taken seriously when giving voice to their anger (Crothers et al., 2005).

### **Aggression as a way of belonging**

To be without a validated voice is to run the risk of loneliness and abandonment (Artz, 1998) and the third theme of the present study explored the ways in which female aggression may be used as a means of belonging (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000b). The participants described a potential clash of norms in relation to aggression, with different communities having different implicit and explicit rules about the expression of aggression. Adolescence is the period of development when young people become most keenly aware of, and able to consider, multiple perspectives. As a result they compare their own evaluations more frequently with others and so there is real opportunity for an identity crisis (Moretti & Higgins, 1999) as they seek to resolve the alternate voices of own and internalised other guides (Artz, 1998).

Teachers offer the potential to offer clear and consistent values in relation to aggression and to model constructive, assertive behaviour and positive relationships at this

crucial time for adolescents (Tatar, 1998). Consistent with the findings of Yoon and Kerber (2003), some of the participants in the present study acknowledged the opportunities for teachers to model bullying and aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, some participants expressed discomfort with facilitating and supporting assertive behaviour in their students, as a more constructive and positive means of dealing with negative emotions. One reason for this was the acknowledgement by some of the participants that female assertiveness was often viewed negatively in the wider community, with assertive women being perceived as bossy. This was perhaps one outcome of treating male aggression as a reference point for female aggression, with one participant noting that identical behaviour would be viewed positively as assertive in males, but negatively as aggressive in females.

## **Conclusion**

The study, by highlighting that female aggression is often viewed in the context of male aggression, rather than on its own terms, suggests that there is a need for a “different voice” (Artz, 1998, p. 100) or framework within which to understand girls' aggression (Underwood et al., 2001). The importance of language, particularly expressive language skills, is evident in child-development and attachment literature (McElwain, Holland, Engle, Wong & Emery, 2014; Zahn-Waxler, Park, Essex, Slattery & Cole, 2005) and it would seem that to focus on continuing to develop these expressive skills offers the opportunity to equip girls with the ability to outline their worldview (Henning-Stout, 1998). This study would suggest that the framework needs to enable individuals to find their voice to express their own self-view (Moretti et al., 2001) and to express the values they hold (Moretti & Wiebe, 1999). It needs to be a framework within which, instead of using their verbal skills to facilitate aggression (Björkqvist, et al., 1992), girls can discover the “freedom to relate authentically” (Crothers et al., 2005). This would necessitate a move away from girls using their verbal social skills to compromise, oblige and avoid and instead promote a genuine

language of assertion. This will demand a reappraisal of what is intended when a girl is asked to be "lady-like" (Crothers et al., p.353).

### **Limitations**

The results of the study must be considered within the context of its limitations. This study took place in one school with its own unique demographic and the professionals who participated volunteered rather than being randomly chosen. The school was deliberately chosen because it was a single sex (all girls) school and it is acknowledged that this choice limits the extent to which the results can be considered to be more widely applicable. However, the choice of the researchers to undertake a qualitative study using IPA as the analytical tool carried the assumption that the results of the study were never intended to be widely generalisable. It should also be noted that the questions asked of participants are chosen to address a particular topic and may, therefore, prime participants to consider the topic in a specific way. One of the questions that participants were asked was 'How do you think aggression displayed by girls compares to that displayed by boys?' This question, while prompting a comparisons between the sexes, did not prime participants to suggest either similarities or differences. It should be acknowledged, however, that differently worded questions would be likely to elicit different themes.

### **Future research**

Despite these limitations, the results of the study do suggest some potential areas for future research. First, it would be useful triangulate qualitative methodology and teacher report with the use of appropriate measures in order to provide a range of perspectives on aggressive behaviour. This would help identify whether the views of the teachers in the present study are shared by others and are supported by more objective measures of aggression. As the teachers in the present study demonstrated awareness of relational

aggression beyond what was expected in the light of previous research (e.g. Shute et al., 2002) it would be fruitful to further investigate how teachers intervene in relational aggression in practice. This may be particularly important in light of research which suggests that there is a higher incidence of relational bullying and victimisation in schools which have more detailed anti-bullying policies (Woods & Wolke, 2003). There is also scope to further explore the ways in which pro-social behaviour and assertiveness can be supported within schools, given that low pro-social behaviour is linked to both relational and overt aggression (Crick, Casas & Mosher, 1997). This may be particularly relevant, given that the teachers in the present study had somewhat differing views on promoting the assertiveness of the female students. All of these strands of research may contribute to the development of an explanatory framework for female aggression that reflects the worldview of females.

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**Table 1: Questions asked in the semi-structured interview**

<b>Semi-structured Interview Schedule</b>	
<b>1.</b>	<b>What are your views about whether girls are or can be aggressive?</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>How do you see this aggression presenting?</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>How do you think aggression displayed by girls compares to that displayed by boys?</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>What impact do you think aggression has in school?</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>How do you think female aggression can be resolved, if at all?</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>How would you compare aggression and assertion?</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Should assertion be encouraged?</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>Is there anything else that you would like to add? Thank you.</b>