

## **Relational aggression: the voices of primary school learners**

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The aim of this research was to explore and describe primary school learners' experiences of relational aggression at school. This was done within a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. In order to give a voice to primary school learners' lived experiences of relational aggression, 25 individual interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of learners from two primary schools in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, North-West Province. Data analysis was done using Tesch's systematic open coding process. Social Learning Theory underscored the theoretical foundation that emphasises relational aggression as a socially learned phenomenon through observation. Although existing theory supports the findings, the reality, however, is that the effects of relational aggression impede negatively on learners' social and academic development and well-being. This jeopardises schools' endeavours to effectively socialise learners in order to establish and maintain effective personal and social relationships. Curtailing relational aggression has the possibility of reducing other forms of aggression in schools and will enhance the creation of effective teaching-learning environments that are conducive to teaching and learning that will support the task of schooling, which is the socialisation of learners to optimally achieve their potential in schools. The article provides some suggestions to assist teachers in endeavours to effectively curtail relational aggression.

**Keywords:** aggression; experience; internal locus of control; life skills; learners; primary school; relational aggression; socialisation; well-being

### **Introduction**

A global concern is that schools as social and academic environments have a significant role to play in the development of learners' socialisation and well-being. Kourkoutas (2012) posits that educational environments such as schools are to become social and academic environments that allow the optimal development of learners' social-emotional and academic skills. School environments are multifaceted environments in which various individuals such as learners, teachers and parents engage in interactions at a social, cognitive and emotional level, and where children not only develop and reinforce their behaviour, but also where children's behaviour can be changed (Kourkoutas, 2012).

This article aims at providing an overview of the current situation in South African schools with regard to aggressive behaviour, and the need for the investigation of relational aggression (RA) in primary school contexts. A brief conceptual and theoretical underpinning of RA is provided. It also describes the research design and methods that were used to explore primary school learners' experience of RA at

school. The second part discusses the findings and proposes the way forward in order to curtail the threat that RA poses to primary school learners' during the middle-childhood developmental phase with regard to their social well-being.

### Background and rationale

Presently, research in South African schools into aggression and violence arises from a national and international concern that these phenomena have gradually increased and are so pervasive that it makes it difficult for schools to create safe and nurturing teaching-learning environments – a prerequisite for the effective socialisation of learners (Botha, 2012; Botha, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2012; South African Council of Educators [SACE], 2011; Westraad, 2011). Extensive research into learners' and teachers' experiences has shown that aggressive and violent social contexts breed aggression and violence (Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2009; SACE, 2011). Concerns are raised that aggressive behaviour in school contexts have far-reaching effects on individuals' social interaction in terms of social exclusion, peer status and manipulation evident of poor social standing and self-concept, which cause poor relationships and ineffective friendships (Breet, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2010; Steyn, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2011). The literature refers to aggressive behaviour as an intent to hurt or harm other individuals, and is therefore viewed as destructive, disruptive or anti-social behaviour that negatively affects individuals in various ways (Fiske, 2010; Kourkoutas, 2012).

This destructive behaviour occurs in families and society, spilling over to schools and giving rise to the incidence of learners' destructive behaviours at school (Bester & Du Plessis, 2010; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; Muthukrishna, 2011). These behaviours have a negative impact on various levels across the divides of age, gender, religious and ethnic groups. Empirical studies have shown that learners and teachers are affected in a number of ways that hamper effective teaching-and-learning, exacerbate disciplinary problems, threaten learners' and teachers' safety, violate human rights, as well as having a negative impact on their mental and social well-being (Botha et al., 2012; SACE, 2011).

Much research has been conducted into aggression in secondary school contexts, including the aggressive behaviour of both learners and teachers, and of the effect of aggression on the adolescent developmental phase of secondary school learners (Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2009). This research was mostly concerned with overt aggression, which includes a wide range of verbal or physical acts of aggression directed toward other people and/or property in various school contexts. In many cases, overt forms of aggression, such as physical and verbal aggression in schools, are swiftly dealt with when identified. In many situations, overt aggressive behaviour such as physical aggression (harm through acts) and direct verbal aggression (harm through words) takes place in the presence of the victim. The perpetrator therefore is "known" and may get into trouble, since the behaviour of the aggressor can be reported and the

issue can be addressed by adults (Kaukiainen, Salmivalli, Björkqvist, Österman, Lahtinen, Kostamo & Lagerspetz, 2001). Schools have a code of conduct that establishes clear boundaries aimed at “establishing order and discipline” in order to curb disruption of the learning process and acknowledging individuals’ human rights (Oosthuizen, 2010:82-83). The code of conduct and the disciplinary system make provision for the punishment of overt aggression and violence such as hitting, stabbing, punching, swearing, name-calling and fighting, since it is viewed as misconduct and therefore punishable. Many schools, however, do not make the same provision for the punishment of covert forms of aggression, such as RA. It is evident that empirical research into covert aggression, specifically RA, has been neglected specifically in South African primary schools’ contexts and in the middle childhood developmental phase of learners.

### Relational aggression

RA is goal-orientated intentional behaviour by means of which individuals intend to punish, hurt, harm or damage another person’s friendships or sense of belonging to a specific peer group through manoeuvring and destruction of relational status (Fiske, 2010; Kourkoutas, 2012). The emphasis is on an intention to harm, a focus on harming interpersonal and social relationships, friendships and a target (Steyn et al., 2011). When acts of indirect forms of RA take place, peer groups become an essential part, as peer groups act as the means of reaching the target (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). Relationally aggressive behaviours include withdrawal of friendships, peer rejection, exclusion, victimisation, ignoring a peer, gossiping and spreading malicious rumours. These behaviours are mostly covert, making it difficult for authorities such as teachers and parents to be aware of or to intervene (Murray-Close, Crick & Galotti, 2006).

Although gender dimensions of aggression offer a view that girls tend to be more relationally aggressive and boys more physically aggressive (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; Fiske, 2010), yet both sexes are socialised in society to fulfil their gender roles, and adjust their behavioural patterns and attitudes according to what a particular society sanctions as appropriate gender roles, being either male or female (Louw & Louw, 2007). Irrespective of children’s gender, as well as both boys’ and girls’ biological or social foundations, their aggressive behaviour displays a deliberate intent to damage, manipulate, hurt, harm or control other individuals (Botha et al., 2012; Fiske, 2010).

The literature confirms that continued RA impacts negatively on individuals’ emotional well-being and may lead to deterioration in children’s school work, loneliness, anxiety, fear of social situations, negative emotions, depression, poor social skills, developing new friendships, their becoming suspicious of their peers, emotional development, continual absenteeism, hostility toward peers, emotional stress, low self-esteem, adjustment difficulties, poor relationship and friendship skills (DeVincentis, 2010; Hendry, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the next section explains the research design and method that were used in order to explore primary school learners' experiences of RA at school.

### **Research process**

A *qualitative design* with a *phenomenological approach* (Howell, 2013) was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of primary school learners' lived experiences of RA at school. During the *sampling process* informed consent was obtained from the Department of Education in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, North-West Province, the principals and the parents of intermediate phase learners in two primary schools. Although both schools have a diverse enrolment of learners in terms of ethnicity, gender, language, culture and religious background, the two primary schools differ demographically in that the one school is situated in a metropolitan area whilst the other school is situated in a rural area. Assent was first obtained from the above stakeholders before the commencement of the sampling process that was conducted in two phases. Bearing in mind the nature of relational aggression and the developmental phase of intermediate phase learners, a different approach was used in phase one that entailed a process of anonymous peer nomination by the intermediate phase learners from the respective two primary schools. Peer nomination is a strategy that can be used by individuals in order to identify relationally aggressive individuals (Field, Kolbert, Crothers & Hughes, 2009; Kistner, Counts-Allan, Dunkel, Drew, David-Ferdon & Lopez, 2010). During this phase, the intermediate phase learners identified relationally aggressive peers as either victims or perpetrators by means of a set of questions associated with relational aggressive behaviours (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). The realisation of the sample was by means of a list of identified names as nominated by the peers in phase one. The purposeful sample of participants included both genders from the ages of 10 to 12 years.

The *data generation* was done by using semi-structured, phenomenological individual interviews. The following question was posed at the beginning of each interview: "*How would you get back at someone whom you have a problem with, without getting caught?*" Twenty-five interviews were conducted and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Tesch's (1990) systematic open coding process was applied during the *data analysis* process, which allowed the segmentation of raw data into various themes and categories that were verified by independent coders during a consensus meeting (Creswell, 2009).

The criteria of Lincoln and Guba's *trustworthiness* model were used to determine the findings' congruency and particular constructed reality (Morse & Field, 1996). This involved using criteria and strategies such as truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability) and neutrality (confirmability). *Credibility* was established by transcribing the audio-recorded interviews verbatim, prolonged engagement in the field, as well as the use of reflective and observational

notes. The credibility of the data was enhanced by checking the correctness of the transcripts with each participant after the interviews had been transcribed. *Transferability* was demonstrated through the use of detailed, dense descriptions of the purposive sample and data generated in the context of the research. *Dependability* was increased by the high level of consistency of the data generation processes (interviews and field notes), the dense description of the research design and methods, as well as member checking and consensus discussions between the independent coders. *Confirmability* was achieved by providing clear descriptions of the data generation process and the interpretation of the data, as well as by presenting the findings in a clear coherent and logical manner.

*Ethical measures* included informed consent School Governing Bodies (SGB, principals, parents) and assent (learners) that was obtained before the commencement of the data generation processes. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any penalty, since participation was entirely voluntary. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms and omitting any information that could identify the participants or their schools when the interviews were transcribed and during the reporting of the findings.

### Discussion of findings

The themes that emerged during data analysis were aggressive behaviour varies in form according to context; learners think that teachers are unaware of relational aggressive acts and that they have misconceptions about relationally aggressive learners; learners experience family members who are employed at school as contributing to the relationally aggressive behaviour of their children; and victims and perpetrators of relationally aggressive behaviour experience negative emotions. The discussion of the findings below includes verbatim quotations from the transcripts in which the participants voice their lived experiences.

#### Theme 1: Relational aggressive behaviour varies in form according to context

The participants stated that learners engaged in relationally aggressive behaviours by means of spreading rumours, telling lies, making threats, giving dirty looks, gossiping, being insulting, subjecting learners to social isolation and humiliating them. They experienced RA when there was little or no supervision by teachers, specifically during their break times or when a teacher was not in the classroom. The following direct quotations indicate how learners experience RA:

*"They enjoy spreading lies"* (participant 4).

*"They (friends) run away from me and look at me strangely and say things to me"* (participant 3).

*"They (group of grade 6 learners) think they can tell everyone what to do...they like to spread stories about others...I think...(name)...she can gossip a lot so she is probably nice but one must be careful of her...I am scared of her...they*

(teachers) *are not with during breaks...there are many children who spread rumours and gossip...the other girls (in our group) then made a list, a voter's roll to see who like me and my best friend...and then the children voted...*" (participant 5).

The use of RA such as gossiping, spreading rumours behind other people's backs, spreading suspicious gossip and creating mistrust, forms a safe breeding ground for relationally aggressive perpetrators, as this kind of behaviour is covert and subsequently remains undetected, unidentified, unpunished or un-accused in many cases (Murray-Close et al., 2006). The opportune time for children to engage in such aggressive acts is when there is no supervision by adults (Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005).

According to the participants, learners used RA as a tool to manipulate peer relationships and to humiliate, hurt or control groups and cliques. They were aware of and acknowledged the power of RA. Some examples of this are quoted below:

*"I ask my friend, 'why don't you (the group) talk to me'...then she say, 'no, you talk to that other girl...and you were laughing'...she (aggressor) always succeeds in being the boss"* (participant 15).

*"Mostly I fight with my friends because they don't want me to play with other children...they want me to stay with them (group)...we must share our secrets"* (participant 24).

*"...then I spoke to one of the girls there and then she said that I must not talk to her...she is too popular for me to talk to her...there are girls who are popular because they are nasty to others"* (participant 9).

According to Paris (2006), the nature of RA is based on the desire of individuals to use peer relationships to gain popularity and to exert control over their peers. Members of a group who engage in RA experience a connectedness and those outside the group perceive the group members as popular (Rayle, Moorhead, Green, Griffen & Ozimek, 2007). The use of RA increases once the members of the group gained a certain status among their peers. These aggressors are often well liked by their peers, even though their behaviour is perceived as questionable by these same peers (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Relationally aggressive children are generally not intimidated by peers and are positively associated with popularity and power in many situations (Hendry, 2012; Ripley & O'Neil, 2009). As Merritt-Gray (2007) explains, children often redirect their RA to peers in their groups to ensure the maintenance of their power over the group and popularity with outsiders. However, motivated by their need to belong, all group members may resort to acts of RA (Rayle et al., 2007).

The participants experienced group identity as more important than their own individual identity, as evidenced by the following quotes:

*"They (the dominant members of the group) teach the others in the group to be just like that...everyone does exactly what they want them to do...they (the most popular group of learners in the grade) make more friends because no one will*

*look for trouble by them”* (participant 9).

*“...we are strong because we are a group...mostly in the group we must all do the same thing...”* (participant 24).

Acts of RA are often performed by children who require social acceptance; their relational aggressive acts ensure their acceptance into a group (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). Socially dominant peers may misuse the desire to be accepted as leverage to control a group of peers and their relationships with each other (Paris, 2006). Groups and cliques are thus often perceived by their peers as intimidating and powerful (Markham, 2010). Shared acts of RA provide aggressors with powerful weapons that can be used to humiliate victims in order to increase their own social status or to punish victims for perceived wrongs (Ludwig, 2007).

Theme 2: Learners think teachers are unaware of relational aggressive acts and that they have misconceptions about relationally aggressive learners

The participants expressed the view that the teachers had misconceptions of who were the relationally aggressive learners and indicated that teachers were also unaware of how they behaved in the absence of teachers, as indicated below:

*“I think we (the learners in the class) know the children better than the teachers know us...the teacher does not actually know about them* (learners known to be relationally aggressive towards others)” (participant 5).

*“The teacher does not know what things they (the aggressive children) do between their friends”* (participant 8).

*“The teacher does not believe the other children (who are not as popular)”* (participant 11).

Participants stated that although they were aware of relationally aggressive learners, these aggressors maintained their well-behaved reputation in the presence of the teachers. Their good behaviour and innocence in the presence of the teachers were used to avoid being caught or labelled by teachers as someone who is mean or nasty to other children. Without evidence, such incidents can simply be downplayed or seen as jealousy or tale bearing. The participants stated the following:

*“...is a little star in the class and makes sure that he does not get into trouble (with the teacher)”* (participant 1).

*“...they (aggressors) are the well-behaved children in the class and people (teachers) do not think that they are like that (aggressive)”* (participant 12).

*“The teacher just sees that the child (aggressor) is smart and when the teacher is there they (the aggressive learners) are dead quiet”* (participant 6).

RA often remains undetected because it is committed “quietly beneath the radar of teachers, guidance counselors [*sic*], and parents” (Simmons, 2002:10). Many adults therefore remain unaware of the seriousness of the claims of RA since they do not witness these acts and tend to discount reports of RA. They usually show no interest in intervening in such situations. They regard RA as similar to bullying – simply an inconsequential part of growing up and essentially transient, or just a developmental

phase children go through that will make them strong (Kruger, 2012). Denouis-Wallace and Shute (2009) highlight that the coercion encompasses some kind of a one-sidedness of dominance or power in support of the perpetrator.

**Theme 3: Learners experience family members who are employed at school as contributing to the relationally aggressive behaviour of their children**

Participants perceived learners whose family members were employed at the same school as having a form of protection that allowed them to commit more acts of RA. Victims were fearful of being reprimanded by the aggressor's family member if they reported them. Some participants made comments that the involvement of a family member results in the adult resolving the conflict in a one-sided way. In turn, participants who experienced such situations did not want to take issue with that specific learner, as they remained fearful of the peer and the peer's family member:

*"...if you tell teacher...(name) she will not really do something because it is...(the aggressor's) aunt"* (participant 13).

*"She (the victim of aggression) is probably scared of me (aggressor) and my mother"* (participant 5).

Although children are almost always keen to involve teachers when being relationally victimised, it seems that children experience adults as unresponsive when relationally aggressive acts are reported to them (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009). Ripley and O'Neil (2009) confirm that relationally aggressive children are capable of keeping up appearances and maintaining a good reputation with adults. Although children's behaviour may become ruthless when interacting with their peers, these aggressors are unlikely to be uncooperative. Instead, they act in a compliant manner when interacting with any form of authority such as teachers and parents (Ripley & O'Neil, 2009). Relationally aggressive children are often very proficient academically, reinforcing their image of being diligent and well behaved in the eyes of the adults (Hendry, 2012).

**Theme 4: Victims and perpetrators of relationally aggressive behaviour experience negative emotions**

Participants described experiencing emotions such as sadness, guilt, hurt, anger, stress and anxiety:

*"...I was also very heart sore..."* (participant 6).

*"I cannot sleep because I feel bad about it..."* (participant 1).

*"...I feel sad and hurt..."* (participant 3).

*"I am angry...I feel sick at heart and it makes me very angry...very angry..."* (participant 9).

*"I feel sad in my heart when that (being the victim of relationally aggressive acts) happens"* (participant 23).

It is clear that some learners cannot establish or maintain constructive relationships that reflect empathy, respect for others, trust and taking responsibility for own beha-



viour; thus they are not able to express and communicate their feelings, emotions and thoughts. Steyn et al. (2011) refer to virtues – such as fairness, friendliness and trust – that are distinctive means to establish and maintain constructive positive social relationships. Unfortunately, these virtues do not seem to characterise some learners' interpersonal and social relationships, which negatively affect their social well-being. Learners seem to lack the strong moral development necessary to make sense of constructive and deconstructive behaviour (Louw & Louw, 2007:8). This affects the way in which they develop social skills and values to establish and maintain positive relations with others (Kassin, Fein & Markus, 2011; Louw & Louw, 2007). Ryff (1989:1071) refers to “self-acceptance”, “positive relations with others” and “autonomy” as some of the dimensions of the psychological well-being of individuals. Individuals with self-actualisation competency are able to show affection and empathy, and to identify with others; hence they are able to develop constructive relationships.

Turning to theory, Crick, Grotzinger and Bigbee (2002:1139) posit that, “the utility of social information-processing models” provide “for increasing the understanding” of children who are relationally aggressive. *Social Learning Theory* (SLT) provides evidence that RA is behaviour learned through observations of social models at home, school, in the community and society, and/or even through media portrayal (Kassin et al., 2011; Fiske, 2010). According to Hart and Kritsonis (2006) SLT is underpinned by three assumptions which provide an understanding of the findings of this research. *Firstly*, SLT assumes that aggression is a learned behaviour and acquired through observation (Fiske, 2010). This implies that individuals learn how to behave in various social situations by observing the behaviour of models in their environment. During the middle-childhood developmental phase the ‘peer group’ is one of the primary social environments in which learners function. The participants pointed out that they are aware of RA and experience it on an ongoing basis in their peer groups. The participants indicated that RA can be utilized in peer groups which may also be employed to permit the aggressor to uphold control or to manipulate peer groups. It therefore seems that RA may be learned by peers.

*Secondly*, social behaviour, such as RA, is learned by means of symbolic modeling that portrays ideas, values and behaviours (Kassin et al., 2011). The findings indicate the perception that learners who are relationally aggressive are popular with the teachers and their peer groups as the aggressors ensure that their reputation remain untarnished in the eyes of the teachers and parents. This result in other individuals also resorting the use of RA as it is difficult for teachers and parents to detect this behaviour.

*Thirdly*, the element of reward serves as reinforcement for social behaviours (Fiske, 2010; Hart & Kritsonis, 2006). This may possibly clarify the findings that RA is not easily observed by teachers and that they are generally unaware of relational aggressive acts taking place, even more so, by whom the acts are carried out. When acts of RA are carried out in the absence of teacher supervision, relationally aggressive learners may maintain their reputations which serve to reinforce their behaviour as

there seems to be no consequences for their behaviour. Involving parents and or teachers who take sides with RA individuals, provides the aggressors with some protection in conflict situations and may substantiate the element of reward, which on the other hand creates fear in the victims when having to speak up. Teachers and parents then become a form of reinforcement for the perpetrators' acts as there are little or no consequences for the perpetrator.

SLT takes several factors into account when determining if certain social behaviour is learnt (Duman & Margolin, 2007). The observer needs to identify with the model and the higher the *level of identification*, the more effectively the observer will learn the behaviour. Since the participants were determined to be accepted by the popular and well-liked peers, although they are relationally aggressive, they learn RA as a 'safe' means to retaliate, as the behaviour is portrayed by the peers with which they can easily identify (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008; Du Plessis, 2012). The findings indicate that RA can be committed without reproach or punishment, thus the issue of *no consequences* emanating from RA behaviour may result in other individuals evaluating how effective and acceptable such behaviour may be (Duman & Margolin, 2007). The aggressors are perceived as to be popular, having power and status amongst their peers as well as their teachers. The aggressors' behaviour is perceived in some situations as acceptable in the sense that the aggressors get what they want and do not get into trouble and so others might resort to such anti-social behaviour.

Viewing the findings of this research is it clear that SLT partially indicates why some learners are prone to imitate, copy, or reproduce relational aggressive behaviour and others not, even if relational aggressive learners are in some cases perceived as powerful and popular.

### **The way forward in efforts to eradicate the challenge that relational aggression poses in primary schools**

Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed to teachers to transform the current situation in schools in order to curb RA among learners, which in return will specifically enhance learners' social and overall well-being:

Teachers need to be sensitised to the nature, causes and effects of RA in schools. The staff member at school, who is responsible for the discipline at school, or psychologists, can talk to the teachers about RA aggression in order to give them an understanding of the phenomenon and how it manifests, as well as how the teachers can address reports of RA at school.

Teaching and learning activities need to emphasise the value of taking care of one's effective communication and social relationships. This entails that teachers pay particular attention to developing learners' self-image, self-concept, self-acceptance and self-actualisation skills not only during curricular activities but also during extra-curricular activities at school.

Teachers are to view and use the school curricula, such as the Life Skills curriculum, as an integrated curriculum in which social and emotional skills development

can take place integrating contextual issues such as RA. Since learners display poor self-esteem and self-actualisation skills, using the Life Skills curriculum provides an opportune means to enhance learners' internal locus of control. The Life Skills curricula provide a means for Life Skills teachers to address peer pressure, response decision-making skills, and conflict resolution skills such as discussion, negotiation, reaching a compromise, as well as forgiveness, which all add to transforming RA. It is therefore important that the education of Life Skills teachers includes explicit instruction on how to integrate the curriculum and contextual issues such as destructive behaviours.

Teachers can strengthen learners' internal locus of control by means of dialogical learning opportunities in which learners can share their feelings and develop their own personal and social skills for establishing and maintaining constructive relationships. Dialogical learning opportunities are characterised by respect, trust, fairness, honesty, empathy, listening to others and taking responsibility for their own behaviour, thus being accountable for their behaviour.

Teachers are to be made aware that RA is a learned behaviour that cannot be viewed as a middle-childhood developmental phase that will eventually diminish (peter out); therefore structural support systems to respond to learners' reports of RA as significant misconduct need to be in place in order to rectify the failure of the current socialisation processes in schools. Schools therefore need to review their current disciplinary systems to ensure that acts of RA are included as actions of misconduct, as other forms of verbal and physical aggressive behaviour.

#### Implications for education and practice

Taking the above suggestion into account, it has positive implications for education and practice, as it will increase learners' level of socialisation at schools, which forms the core of their personal and social skills development. Socially competent learners are able to take responsibility for their own behaviour, show high levels of internal locus of control and have good self-esteem. This will further add to the overall improvement of learners' personal and social well-being in establishing and maintaining effective constructive relationships that have the prospect of reducing not only relational aggression but also other forms of aggression in schools. The overall benefit lies in creating teaching and learning environments that are characterised by respect and trust, which are prerequisites for effective teaching and learning conducive to learners to optimally achieve their potential in schooling.

#### Limitations and suggested future research

The sample size was too small and therefore the findings could not be generalized to other contexts. I therefore suggest that future research include more primary schools as well as the inclusion of the foundation and senior phases in primary schools since this research only focused on the intermediate phase learner in their middle childhood developmental phase.

Further research should explore the family and social backgrounds of learners involved as victims or perpetrators with regards to relational aggression in South African school contexts. An in depth research is necessary to explore the dynamics and associations between personal, family, and school characteristics and relational aggression that also highlights the subjective experience of learners involved in relational aggression should be undertaken.

### Conclusion

Teachers' failure to realise and acknowledge that RA is not just a 'phase' of primary school learners' middle-childhood development has a serious impact on learners' social and academic development. If teachers do not intervene and acknowledge the seriousness of this destructive behaviour, then RA and other forms of aggression will escalate and likely persist during learners' adolescent developmental phase making them vulnerable in their socialisation and communication with other individuals and placing their overall well-being at risk.

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