

The Moderating Effect of Teacher Support on Depression and Relational Victimization in  
Minority Middle School Students

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Abstract

Support provided by caring teacher-student relationships is essential for the emotional well-being of students who are bullied. The researchers were interested in discovering whether perceived teacher support would moderate the relationship between relational victimization and depression in low-income minority middle school students. A mixed methods study was conducted at a Title I middle school located in central Florida ( $N = 153$ ). Results indicated that males and females experienced equal amounts of victimization and also reported perceived social support fairly equally. Regression analysis indicated that relational victimization predicted depression. Teacher support served as a moderator variable for relational victimization and depression in middle school students, especially for students who experienced moderate to severe bullying. There were no interaction effects for gender, race, or grade. Finally, qualitative results were analyzed utilizing Consensual Qualitative Review (CQR) and triangulated with the quantitative results. Emergent findings are presented.

## **The Moderating Effect of Teacher Support on Depression and Relational Victimization in Minority Middle School Students**

Exclusion from groups, retaliation for academic success, physical attacks for unknown reasons, and verbal attacks over the internet are all examples of bullying behaviors that are highly prevalent across the United States and internationally. A 2009 study found that over half of a nationally representative sample of children in grades 6 through 10 reported being verbally bullied, socially bullied, or both, and over a fifth reported being physically bullied (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Other estimates indicate between 20-30% of students are involved in bullying either as bullies or victims of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001; Pranjic & Bajraktarevic, 2010; Solberg & Olweus, 2003).

Bullying is defined as being repeatedly exposed over time to intentionally harmful actions by a peer of seemingly higher status or power (Olweus, 1997), and it manifests as the repeated use of one (or more) of five different types of aggressive behavior: verbal, physical, relational, social and cyber. Physical and verbal aggression are by far the most conspicuous of these types (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010), and are usually considered to be direct forms of aggression. Indirect forms of bullying include relational aggression (RA) and social aggression. These two types of bullying, while defined in varying ways in the literature, are very similar in nature and encompass aggressive behaviors that attempt to harm others through indirect means, such as gossiping, exclusion, ignoring, and spreading rumors (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

Awareness of bullying has spread rapidly over the last several decades, as has awareness of the many deleterious effects of bullying victimization. These effects can include increased behavioral and school adjustment problems (Arseneault et al., 2006), suicidal ideation (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010), depression, loss of confidence, feelings of anger, loss of self-esteem, frustration, nausea, drinking alcohol, anxiety, and hopelessness about the future (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Pranjic & Bajraktarevic, 2010). While many students may in fact have symptomatic pathology underlying their bullying behavior, ultimately, bullying happens within a context, and it is the context that must be likewise addressed. As such, the basis of our article underlines the concept that RA is a systemic problem that must include component parts such as parents, peers, and most importantly, teachers. Moreover, the construct of relational victimization (RV) is an important one to continue to address to understand how to target the behavior and provide appropriate interventions.

### **Bullying as a Systemic Problem**

A social-ecological context is the paradigm our study is based upon and is aligned with Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt and Hymel's (2010) notion that the framework offers a holistic viewpoint such that children and adolescents are directly affected by numerous systems, including peer groups, parent-child relationships, and teacher-student relationships. Bullying can be seen as a group process, as it is often enabled or supported by many outside players aside from bullies and victims, such as bystanders, parents, and teachers (Smith, Schneider & Ananiadou, 2004).

### **Teacher-Student Relationships and Bullying**

Historically, the teacher-student relationship has provided robust results in terms of protective factors for youth, including substance abuse, emotional and behavioral disorders, and academic performance (Birch, 1997; Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009; Suldo, Mihalas, Powell, & Witte, 2008). Boulton and colleagues (2009) found evidence of this "teacher

protection hypothesis” (p. 257) by demonstrating that for students who perceived a good relationship with their teacher, there was no correlation between perception of classroom safety and levels of victimization.

For those students without close teacher relationships, there was an inverse correlation between bullying victimization levels and perceptions of classroom safety. In these cases, supportive teacher-student relationships provided protective mechanisms for victimized students, possibly by facilitating student disclosure of bullying victimization (Boulton et al., 2009). Complimentary effects were found by Espelage and Swearer (2009), whereby a positive school climate (construct included teacher-influencing factors) served as a buffer against the negative effects of low parental support and poor peer influences on bullying and victimization. In terms of the effects of teacher-student relationships on bullying prevalence, Roland and Galloway (2002) found that student ratings of their teachers’ classroom management had a strong correlation with bullying prevalence within the class, even independent of students’ home life conditions. These ratings scored teachers on overall teaching competence, classroom monitoring, intervention skills (how teachers handled undesired events), and personal caring for students. Likewise, in cases in which classroom atmosphere and teacher-student relationships were highly conflicted, students showed an increase in verbal and physical aggression (Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, & Johnson, 2004).

Given the enormous potential for positive teacher-student relationships in mitigating the harmful effects of RV, it seems especially unfortunate that this potential often remains unexplored by teachers or their students. In fact, a study by Fekkes, Pijpers, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2004) found that out of those students who were involved in bullying or were being bullied, almost half did not report incidents to their teachers. Moreover, within the extant literature base on bullying there are few studies that actually address the role of teacher support in rectifying the bullying pandemic.

A component conspicuously lacking in most major anti-bullying interventions is a focus on the relationship between a teacher and their students -- not as a classroom conglomerate, but as individuals with emotional needs beyond alacrity and instructional quality. This is unfortunate, as Malecki and Demaray (2003) found that students’ perceptions of emotional support from their teachers was the greatest predictor of students’ social skills and academic success, proving more important than informational, appraisal, or instrumental. Wills and Shinar (2000), p. 88, describe emotional support as “the availability of one or more persons who can listen sympathetically when an individual is having problems and can provide indications of caring and acceptance,” and with whom one can feel accepted and comfortable expressing their feelings and concerns (Bokhorst, Sumter & Westenberg, 2010). Teachers are expected when they enter the profession to provide emotional support, in addition to informational support.

Additionally, Cothran, Kulinna, and Garragy (2003) found that relationships, care, and respect were three central themes identified as important by 182 students from various backgrounds. These findings are mirrored by the observation that students who perceive less social support often have more behavioral problems (Mihalas et al., 2009). Many anti-bullying interventions feature elements designed to foster increased caring parent-child relationships. Encouraging complimentary caring relationships between teachers and their students seems a logical progression.

Teachers have an opportunity to serve a function beyond instruction and intervention for their students. As O’Connor (2010) noted, by developing emotionally caring relationships with their students, teachers can serve as role models for what a healthy and positive relationship

looks like. Especially regarding school bullying, a caring teacher-student relationship provides a framework for the teacher to model pro-social behaviors, healthy conflict resolution, coping and emotion regulation skills, and perhaps even help alleviate some of the suffering caused by bullying or victimization.

### **The Present Study**

#### **Theoretical Argument for Study**

The basis of this study hinges on the argument that caring teacher-student relationships are critical to the widespread success of anti-bullying interventions. There is a paucity of literature to support this statement and our study is one of few that intend to provide credence and merit to teachers' primary role in bullying prevention and intervention. The following are tenets for the execution of the study.

First, much of the research on bullying and bullying victimization highlights the elementary school setting (Crick, 1997; Dill, Vernberg, Fonagy, Twemlow & Gamm, 2004; Nansel & Overpeck, 2003), although youth that are most affected by bullying are often middle school students. During the early adolescent period numerous milestones are reached, including the development of sense of self. Assuming that indirect aggression is the foremost type of bullying in schools (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001), researchers should understand the effects this form of aggression has on adolescent development. This study attempted to address these effects from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint.

Second, the stability of remaining in the victim role becomes most potent during adolescence (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001), emphasizing immediate and effective intervention. For example, if a student continues to be victimized in the high school setting, the likelihood of entering abusive relationships in the future may increase (Coie & Dodge, 1983).

Third, while a number of studies have been conducted on perpetrators (e.g., Connor, Steingard & Melloni, 2003; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Van Acker & Talbott, 1999), fewer studies address the characteristics of victims and associated mental health outcomes from a mixed methods standpoint. Additionally, studies for victims pertaining to specific risk and protective factors that mediate and or moderate the relationship between victimization and psychopathology are minimal in number. Further research on the mediating and or moderating factors between victimization and pathology will be essential to the creation of more effective interventions and coping skills.

#### **Research Questions**

The study addressed the following research questions utilizing a mixed methods analysis: What percentage of students in this sample have experienced RV? Specifically, does gender or ethnicity play a role in the reporting of RV? Does victim status predict higher rates of depression among youth in this sample? Does teacher support moderate the relationship between depression and RV? If so, does this relationship differ based on gender, ethnic group, or grade? How do qualitative interviews compare, contrast, or enhance quantitative findings?

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) recommend one of the best ways to integrate qualitative and quantitative data, and to further triangulate the information, is through mixed methods methodology. The specific type of mixed methods design utilized was a sequential dominant quantitative design followed by qualitative analysis (QUAN → qual) (Morse, p.205 as cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

## Method

### Participants and Setting

A total of 820 consent forms were distributed of which 235 were returned (28.66% response rate). Ultimately, a total of 153 students participated in the study. The study took place in a large urban middle school in Central Florida.

**Sample characteristics.** The majority of the sample was sixth graders (42%), followed by seventh graders (32%), and then eighth graders (26%). The average age of students who participated was 12.94, or almost 13 years old ( $SD = 1.13$ ). While the sample consisted of more females than males, a significant difference for gender was not evident across the minority groups,  $\chi^2(2, 152) = 0.18, p > .01$ . Additionally, 82.9% of the students stated that they received free and reduced lunch. A statistically significant difference did not exist for students of different minority membership and their attainment of free and reduced lunch,  $\chi^2(2, 152) = 2.5, p > .05$ . The one group of students who were excluded from data collection was students with severe developmental disabilities, specifically students who had compromised intellectual functioning.

### Quantitative Procedures

Forms were distributed to each classroom by the primary investigator and a three minute speech about the study was shared at the beginning of each language arts class. Students were required to obtain informed consent from a legal guardian prior to participation (i.e., active consent). Additionally, participants were required to provide their assent prior to survey administration and individual interviews. The Ph.D.-level researcher and two undergraduate students collected the data over a period of three weeks in the school cafeteria; individual interviews were conducted in a private room on campus. Measures were administered in a random fashion to eliminate any potential order effects and counter-balancing was used to protect confidentiality. Students took on average 30 minutes to complete the survey.

### Measures

**The Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (CDI-S).** Depression was assessed using the Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (CDI-S; Kovacs, 1985). The CDI-S is 10 items and asks an individual to describe his or her feelings about a variety of issues in the past two weeks, on a scale ranging from zero to two. A score of zero indicates an absence of the symptom, whereas a score of two indicates that the symptom is present most of the time. The overall reliability for the CDI-S was .82, which is consistent with the reported reliability coefficient in the literature ( $\alpha = .80$ ). The CDI-S was slightly more reliable for females ( $\alpha = .84$ ) than for males ( $\alpha = .74$ ). The reliability also differed based on ethnicity such that African American and Hispanic participants obtained higher reliability coefficients ( $\alpha = .82$  and  $.83$ , respectively) compared to students in the mixed race group ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

**The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).** The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki, Demaray, & Elliott, 2000) was originally developed to ascertain adolescent participants' perceptions of social support from five sources: parent(s), teacher(s), classmate(s), a close friend, and persons at school. Each sub-scale contains 12 items that measure four different types of support: emotional, appraisal, informational, and

instrumental. The CASSS is based on a six point scale whereby the higher the global and sub-scale scores, the more social support a student perceives.

In this study, a modified version of the CASSS was used and the sub-scale “persons at your school” was eliminated. The researchers believed that there was overlap between the scale “persons at your school” and the scales “classmates” and “teachers.” The developer of the CASSS was consulted on this decision and data was provided to this team to help further aide in decision-making. Correlational information and factor structure matrix data substantiated the notion to exclude the “persons at your school” sub-scale. Notably for the present study, only the teacher support sub-scale was included in the final analyses. In this study, the reliability of the scores on the CASSS (48 items) was high ( $\alpha = .97$ ), as was the reliability for the teacher support sub-scale ( $\alpha = .79$ ). There were no differences in the reliability coefficients across gender, grade, or ethnic groups.

**Social Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ).** The Social Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) is one of the most widely used measures to assess overt victimization (three items), relational victimization (five items), and prosocial behavior (five items) (c.f., Storch & Esposito, 2003; Storch, Nock, Masia-Warner & Barlas, 2003). The scale consists of 15 items that are rated on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time). Initial psychometric data collected by Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found adequate internal consistency across factors ( $\alpha = .77$  to  $.80$ ). The reliability of the SEQ for the total sample was ( $\alpha = .84$ ). The scores from the instrument were more reliable for males ( $\alpha = .84$ ) versus females ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Additionally, the scores appeared more reliable for African American ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and Hispanic students ( $\alpha = .81$ ) than mixed race students ( $\alpha = .72$ )

### Qualitative Procedures

A total of eight individual interviews were completed through a semi-structured interview of five questions that included sub-questions and probes. The interview questions were developed based on the general focus of the study (i.e., bullying, victimization, support). The students chosen for the interview portion of the study included four students who were classified as experiencing high levels of depression ( $T = 70$  or higher on the CDI-S) and high levels of victimization (in the top quartile on the SEQ), and the other four students were classified as experiencing little to no depression ( $T < 35$  on the CDI-S) and high levels of victimization (in the top quartile on the SEQ).

Six of the students were sixth graders, and two were seventh graders. Additionally, all of the students who were interviewed in the high depression category were females and all the students who were interviewed in the low depression category were males. This differentiated gender split was not done purposefully, as students were chosen completely based on their scores. Three of the four females were Hispanic and one female was African American. One of the males was Hispanic and three of the males were African American. Four of the students in this sample reported that they were bilingual. Three of the students reported living in a single parent home, and seven reported siblings living in the home.

**Qualitative Analysis.** Within the mixed methods design, the qualitative data were analyzed with Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methods (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005) utilizing NVivo 9 (QSR International’s NVivo 9 software). This approach emphasizes consensus agreement between judges regarding the meaning and classification of

data, is designed for in-depth analysis of a relatively small sample size, and is uniquely suited to analysis of semi-structured interviews. Rather than focusing on numbers to describe data, CQR relies on words distilled from the raw data to communicate the meaning, intent, and subjective truth of respondents' answers. Therefore, the approach first analyzes each sample (or "case") individually, and then seeks to identify commonalities across individual cases. The method is also exploratory, in that the categories, classifications, and meanings are derived from the data via iterative, in-depth analysis by team members.

The researchers began the CQR process by individually reading eight interviews and coding responses to one or more broad topic domains generated organically from the transcripts. Initially, this process resulted in a total of seventeen domains, which the researchers eventually narrowed down to ten. The process of narrowing down the list of domains involved combining overlapping domains, segmenting indistinct domains, and creating new domains to reflect unexpected findings. The researchers then analyzed the raw data within each domain to create core ideas from the data. Core ideas are concise summaries of salient recurring topics occurring in the raw data, described in fewer words while maintaining the raw data's original meaning and perspective. The researchers consensually agreed to add sub categories to certain core idea codes so as provide a more detailed understanding of participant responses. This consensus-based process resulted in collapsing or creating categories as needed to best fit the data.

*Reliability, validity, and stability.* As commonly utilized in CQR, the researchers implemented a rotating internal auditor procedure (Hill et al., 2005). Significant research has questioned the necessity of performing a reliability check on qualitative data, arguing that the concept of reliability is irrelevant in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Given the extensive internal auditing procedures in place throughout the qualitative analysis, as well as the use of rotating internal auditors, a standardized reliability check was not performed. Additionally, there is also debate as to the stability check's utility and necessity (see Hill et al., 1997). Due to the small qualitative sample size and the debate, the researchers opted not to perform this procedure.

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

*Research Question: What percentage of this sample have experienced relational victimization?*

Overall reported prevalence of RV in this sample was 24.48%. However, rather than treating RV as a homogenous construct, the researchers wanted to discern between different types of relationally aggressive behaviors and discover which type of RV was most pervasive to students in this sample. Therefore, a frequency count was completed for each item that was constructed to measure RV (i.e., items 1, 2, 4, 5, 7) on the SEQ. Thirty percent of students reported that they are left out on purpose when it is time to do an activity. Similarly, 38.8% of students reported purposeful exclusion from groups. Higher percentages were found for students who reported being the victim of malicious lies (i.e., 63.2%). Students also experienced threats from other students (34.9%) as a means of group exclusion. Finally, many students purported that youth at school say mean things in order to keep others from liking them (46.1%).

*Research Question: Does gender or race play a role in the reporting of relational victimization?*

The data demonstrated that both genders experienced multiple types of RA in roughly equal percentages (see Table 1). The only significant difference between experience of RA behavior based on gender was percentage of mean statements made  $\chi^2(4, 152) = 10.85, p < .05$ ;



whereby females experienced more mean statements than males. This study provided evidence that RA is highly prevalent across gender, and overall rates of different forms of RA are largely similar across gender.

Examining differences in RA behaviors by race provides further insight. Race proved to be a statistically significant factor in the percentage of students experiencing two different types of RA (see Table 2); being purposely left out of an activity  $\chi^2(8,152) = 10.15, p < .05$ , and relationally damaging mean statements  $\chi^2(8,152) = 9.58, p < .05$ . Mixed race students experienced the lowest percentages of mean statements as compared to African American or Hispanic students. For example 34.6% of mixed race students reported experiencing mean statements “almost never,” compared to 14.3% of both African American and Hispanic students. Additionally, only 7.7% of mixed race students experienced such statements “all the time,” compared to their African American (14.3%) and Hispanic peers (11.9%). Another notable racial disparity in the results is the fact that 59.5% of African American students reported “never” being purposely left out of activities, whereas 38.1% of Hispanics and 38.5% of mixed race students indicated this happening to them at least once.

Table 1

*Percentage of Males and Females Who Reported Varying Degrees of Victimization (N = 15*

SEQ Items		Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost All the Time	All the Time	$\chi^2$
		%	%	%	%	%	
1 (Left out) <sup>a</sup>	M	39.2	23.5	31.4	0.00	5.9	7.08
	F	46.5	26.7	17.8	5.9	3.0	
2 (Group exclusion) <sup>b</sup>	M	43.1	29.4	15.9	3.9	7.8	6.70
	F	40.6	14.9	26.7	8.9	8.9	
4 (Lies) <sup>c</sup>	M	27.5	19.6	33.3	7.8	11.8	6.64
	F	19.8	11.9	28.7	15.8	23.8	
5 (Threats) <sup>d</sup>	M	51	21.6	15.7	5.9	5.9	2.74
	F	45.5	15.8	16.8	11.9	9.9	
7 (Mean statements) <sup>e</sup>	M	39.2	29.4	15.7	3.9	11.8	10.85*
	F	34.7	11.9	32.7	8.9	11.9	

Note. M = Males. F = Females.

<sup>a</sup>“Are you left out on purpose when it is time to do an activity?”; <sup>b</sup>“Does a kid who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group anymore?”; <sup>c</sup>“Has another kid told lies about you to make other kids not like you or be at you? ?”; <sup>d</sup>“Does another kid say they won’t like you unless you do what they want you to do?”; <sup>e</sup>“Does another kid try to keep others from liking you by saying mean things about you?”

\* $p < .05$

*Research Question: Does victim status predict higher rates of depression among youth in this sample?*

Of the 153 participants, 5.6% of students met the established criterion on the CDI-S to be deemed “clinically significant” for depression (i.e.,  $T = 70$  or higher). Also, 5.2% of students in

the sample scored in the “Borderline” range for depression (i.e.,  $T = 60 - 69$ ). The results from the regression analysis established a significant positive predictive relationship between relational victimization and depression  $F(1, 151) = 31.94, p < .0001$ . The variance in depression accounted for by relational victimization was 21.7%.

Table 2

*Percentage of Respondents Who Reported Varying Degrees of Victimization by Race (N = 153)*

SEQ Items		Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost All the Time	All the Time	$\chi^2$
		%	%	%	%	%	
1 (Left out) <sup>a</sup>	AA	59.5	14.3	16.7	7.1	2.4	10.15*
	His.	38.1	32.1	22.6	2.4	4.8	
	Mix.	38.5	23.1	30.8	3.8	3.8	
	Total	44.1	25.7	22.4	3.9	3.9	
2 (Group exclusion) <sup>b</sup>	AA	50.0	14.3	14.3	9.5	11.9	6.520
	His.	36.9	20.2	27.4	7.1	8.3	
	Mix.	42.3	26.9	23.1	3.8	3.8	
	Total	41.4	19.7	23.0	7.2	8.6	
4 (Lies) <sup>c</sup>	AA	23.8	11.9	31.0	9.5	23.8	4.970
	His.	23.8	15.5	26.2	16.7	17.9	
	Mix.	15.4	15.4	42.3	7.7	19.2	
	Total	22.4	14.5	30.3	13.2	19.7	
5 (Threats) <sup>d</sup>	AA	50.0	19.0	11.9	7.1	11.9	3.550
	His.	45.2	17.9	16.7	11.9	8.3	
	Mix.	50.0	15.4	23.1	7.7	3.8	
	Total	47.4	17.8	16.4	9.9	8.6	
7 (Mean statements) <sup>e</sup>	AA	31.0	14.3	35.7	4.8	14.3	9.58*
	His.	40.5	14.3	23.8	9.5	11.9	
	Mix.	30.8	34.6	23.1	3.8	7.7	
	Total	36.2	17.8	27.0	7.2	11.8	

Note. AA = African American, His. = Hispanic, Mix. = Mixed Race. \* $p < .05$

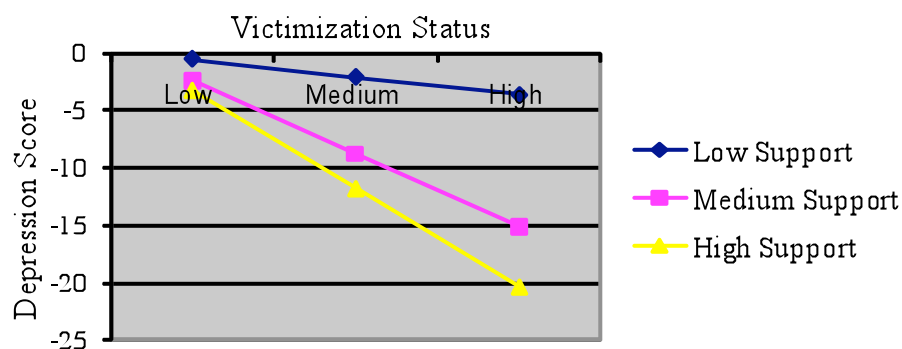
<sup>a</sup>“Are you left out on purpose when it is time to do an activity?”; <sup>b</sup>“Does a kid who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group anymore?”; <sup>c</sup>“Has another kid told lies about you to make other kids not like you or be at you? ?”; <sup>d</sup>“Does another kid say they won’t like you unless you do what they want you to do?”; <sup>e</sup>“Does another kid try to keep others from liking you by saying mean things about you?”

\* $p < .05$

*Research Question: Does teacher support moderate the relationship between depression and relational victimization?*

A two-way interaction emerged from the data,  $F(149, 1825.15) = 26.73, p = 0.00$ , supporting the statement that higher levels of teacher support moderated the relationship between relational victimization and depression. For example, with low levels of teacher support, victimization was related to higher levels of depression. As teacher support increased however, the relationship between victimization and depression was attenuated. The incremental  $R^2$ -change value was small ( $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ). This finding (i.e., the two-way interaction) held significance when race was held constant,  $F(148, 1300.18) = 19.39, p = 0.00$ , gender was held constant,  $F(148, 1278.14) = 18.94, p = 0.00$  and when grade was held constant,  $F(148, 1232.85) = 18.02, p = 0.00$ . To promote easier interpretation of this moderator effect, see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Teacher Support as a Moderator of Depression



Based on the figure above, teacher support correlated with decreased depression index scores across all categories of victimization categories (i.e. low, medium, high). While the attenuating effect of teacher support on depression scores remains evident even in students with low levels of relational victimization, the effect becomes much more pronounced for students who fit into medium and high victimization categories. For example, the difference in depression index score reduction for highly victimized students with low levels of teacher support versus high levels of teacher support was 16.5 points.

*Research Question: Does the relationship between teacher support and depression differ based on gender, grade, or ethnicity?*

A regression model with a three-way interaction was not supported by this data such that gender, ethnicity, or grade combined with teacher social support did not significantly moderate the relationship between victimization and depression.

### Qualitative Findings<sup>1</sup>

*Research Question: How do qualitative interviews compare, contrast, or enhance quantitative findings?*

The qualitative results of this study revealed participants' experiences with bullying, the feelings and reactions that bullying provoked in them, how bullying was related to their school

<sup>1</sup> Note: Appendices further detailing the qualitative results may be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

experience, peer relations and home lives, as well as where and how participants sought support. Three primary themes emerged from the data, including bullying and victimization, support, and characterological representations.

**Bullying and victimization.** All eight participants reported being victimized by one or more types of bullying (e.g., physical, verbal, relational). Seven students specified the frequency with which they experienced bullying, with four reporting daily occurrences. The other three participants reported bullying frequency as two to three days per week or sporadic. Bullying mainly occurred during the morning and lunchtime in specific hotspots including bathrooms, portables, classrooms, and hallways. Notably, portables were consistently cited by students, while all other hotspots were variant in nature. One participant claimed that bullying occurred “pretty much anywhere.”

Verbal bullying was experienced by all participants and occurred frequently. Topic areas of attacks included: victims’ family, sexual orientation, physical appearance, and masculinity or femininity. One participant mentioned that students told her that she “look[s] like a whore.” Physical bullying was cited by five students, and included acts such as hitting and pushing. One participant said, “they just hit me and laugh and walk off.” Relational victimization was the least common type of bullying identified, being cited by half the participants. In this interview sample, common types of relational bullying included gossip, lies and negative non-verbal looks. One participant recalled being the target of gossip, stating “they say that... [a particular peer], she likes my boyfriend and that he'd rather go out with her instead of me.” Another participant highlighted the often covert nature of RA by noting that “sometimes they'll say something, like whisper to their friends or something.”

An emergent theme within the data was the concept of “social distance,” based on participants’ explanations of their level of personal connection to the bullies ( $n = 5$ ). Social distance is defined as two parties (i.e., bully and victim) who have some basic knowledge of each other, yet are neither friends, nor acquaintances. Some examples of social distance included statements such as, “there's a lot of people I really don't know that make up those things;” “I don't even know them;” and “[they] just know my name and stuff.”

By far, the most common emotional response to bullying victimization reported was frustration, referenced by seven out of eight participants a total of 16 times, twice as many times as the next most frequent emotional response—anger. Anger and resignation were also reported and discussed with intensity by participants as exemplified by the statement: “It’s like, many times it would get to the point where I just wish I could go hit them and stuff because if I was in an angry rage and I... am much stronger than I seem.” Another emotional response victims displayed was to downplay bullies’ behavior. Victims often tried to minimize the incident by saying that bullies engage in the behavior everywhere or do the behavior to everyone. For example, one participant stated that bullies “probably take it out on other people who are like me as well.” Another participant downplayed a physical bullying incident, reporting that bullies “push me around, and just, you know, sometimes hit me accidentally.” Other less frequent emotional responses included depression, feeling hurt, obsession, loss of control, and self-sabotage. Two telling statements showed the spectrum of introversion to extroversion in types of emotional responses that participants displayed: “they just make me upset but I try not to show it so I won't get in a fight;” and “[they] kind of back off a bit because they'll see that I'm uneasy.”

Retaliation and retreat were the most commonly cited externalized reactions to bullying, both being described by three participants. Retreat, which was also noted by one participant as a

mechanism for coping with victimization, was described as a behavioral response to bullying by a student who said she would "...usually put [her] head down and I hide my eyes... behind my hair like this.....and people will see that that means I'm sad." Another example of retreat is shared by a participant who said that he, "just wanna spend some time alone [*sic*]." Other reactions to victimization include ignoring the bullying, protecting self against physical aggression, and attempting to repair peer networks damaged by relational aggression. Apart from describing their specific responses to bullying, some cases identified additional negative physical or social consequences to bullying victimization such as physical pain, as well as damage to friendships and romantic relationships.

The bully-victim paradigm was evident in the sample such that three of the victims also shifted from victim to bully status. For example, one participant admitted, "I take it out on other people when I get really mad, even though it bothers me, I still do it." Similarly, another participant stated, "they'll just mess [with me], so I mess with them." In contrast to this philosophy, three students, two of which also described bully-victim behaviors, specified reasons for *not* retaliating when bullied, such as not believing in fighting back or hitting girls, fear of retribution from bullies, or suspension from school.

Seven out of eight participants offered their own characterizations or impressions of bullies. The most common bully characterizations were meanness, persistence, and stupidity. Less frequent characterizations included rudeness, behaving disruptively, and the belief that bullies consciously choose specific targets and judged victims unfairly. Of note, only one participant described bullies as popular. In addition to describing bullies, students also provided a variety of reasons as to why they were being bullied, including being an easy target, having low self-esteem, lacking a strong social network, being judged on their appearance, having poor affect regulation (i.e., easily angered), and believing that bullies cope with their own problems by bullying others. Some participants could not identify any particular reason why they were bullied, sharing that "[bullies] just go up to you for no reason and hit you," and "[bullies] beat [victims] up for no reason."

Participants also had difficulties identifying personal strategies to stop bullying. Telling school personnel when they are bullied and telling the bullies themselves to stop were strategies used by two participants. Another participant described yelling at bullies to get them to stop. School anti-bullying policies were mentioned by four students with mixed reviews; two participants felt that the school's anti-bullying policy was effective and three considered it ineffective. Of those who spoke favorably of the school's anti-bullying policy, uniforms were the highlight -- "the uniforms are good because then... everybody won't pick on everybody about their clothes because they're wearing the same thing." One of the participants countered this favorable anti-bullying policy impression by lamenting "when they say they're gonna take care of all bullying, they don't really enforce it that well because I'm still being bullied and stuff."

Although many participants struggled to identify strategies to stop bullies, five of the victimized youth identified ways they coped with the ramifications of bullying. The researchers differentiated the category "coping" from "strategies to stop bullies" because "coping" insinuates that participants explicitly mentioned improved or alleviated symptoms as a result of the coping mechanism used. Their "strategies," on the other hand, may or may not have effectively improved symptoms. Two participants noted that staying busy helped them cope with bullying, such as when one student claimed it helped "keep my mind off of certain stuff." The six other coping strategies identified were each described by only one participant. As previously mentioned, retreat was used to alleviate the pain of bullying victimization, as when a victim

shared they merely “don’t talk to anyone.” Private self-speech was another coping tool whereby a male student stated he would tell himself, “man they keep playing, just don’t mess with them.” Other coping strategies included ignoring the bullies, drawing, or acceptance -- “sometimes you just have to let people be people, you know.”

**Support.** Participants brought to light various sources or personal structures utilized for support, characteristics of these support systems, and the specific circumstances under which the participants did or did not turn to them. Overall, participants cited that they turn to peers, family, mental health professionals, religious personnel, school personnel (administrators and teachers), pets, significant others, and themselves for support. Given the quantitative variables examined in the present study, the focus of the researchers' attention was on teacher support.

Participants’ comments regarding teacher support were split between descriptions of teachers who were viewed as supportive, and those who were viewed as unsupportive. Six students identified teachers as being supportive, naming flexibility, understanding, and helpfulness as some of the key traits of good teachers. Helpfulness was the most frequently referenced trait by participants -- one student stated that a teacher was supportive because she “listens, and... tries to help me.” Another participant stated she felt supported because her teacher “defends me no matter what.”

Five students discussed unsupportive teachers, describing these teachers as mean, unfair, unhelpful, and easily angered. The most frequently discussed undesirable characteristic of a teacher was unfairness. For example, one teacher was deemed unsupportive because he seemed “really impossible to deal with ‘cause of the rules he makes.” Teachers misplacing blame was another example of student-perceived unfair behavior, as exemplified by one participant who described a teacher blaming him for another student's misbehavior: “[the teacher] says, ‘is somebody talkin’ back there?’ She just blames it on like me and my friends sometimes.”

**Characterological representations.** Participants enjoyed speaking about their personal traits. The most frequently identified of these traits included amicability, maturity, and studying hard. Amicability was noted by six participants. For example, one participant said that they “can get along with anybody,” and another stated they were “very forgiving.”

Of note, only one of the eight participants described herself as having low self-esteem. However, this student referenced her low self-esteem a total of eight times and reflected that “I have a very, very low self-esteem,” and “I don’t believe that I’m that much.” Similarly, the same participant identified as being socially withdrawn, stating that “...if I ever actually need support, I don’t actually go to someone, I just go and kind of, I’m very disclosed [*sic*].”

All other characterological representations were referenced by only one or two participants. Some of these personal traits included being adventurous, having anger management issues, being a perfectionist, taking pride in one’s appearance, respecting authority, and having a positive self-perception; for example, being “very talented,” as one participant stated. On the contrary, other participants’ self-perceptions were less positive. Two students indicated having a defeatist attitude -- one stated, “...I guess anywhere you go there are gonna be people who make fun of me [*sic*]”).

## Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of teacher support as a moderating variable for the effects of RA on depression in students. The researchers

hypothesized that a caring student-teacher relationship would be both critical to victims' perceived emotional support and effective in decreasing victims' depressive symptoms. This hypothesis was confirmed via a mixed methods analysis, and the results, implications, and limitations are discussed in depth below.

### **Relational Aggression and Victimization**

**Prevalence.** The reported prevalence of RV in this sample was approximately 25%. This percentage exceeded prevalence rates reported on other school campuses (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen & Rimpela, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001). However, RV mean scores obtained in this study were consistent with Storch and colleagues (2003), who also found elevated mean scores for RV in urban minority students. However, studies with other student populations (e.g., rural Caucasian and African American) found lower total mean scores than this study (Martin & Huebner, 2007). Also, studies by Crick and Bigbee (1998) and Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found lower mean scores for victimization. Thus inferences may be made that participant demographics, ethnic composition of the sample or urban school setting may have contributed to higher reports of victim status. Frequency and intensity of RV may be a more prominent aspect of the lives of minority youth living in urban environments compared to peers living in alternate communities.

RV in this sample was experienced by both males and females equally, as was found by Peskin, Tortolero and Markham (2006). As this study did not control for overt aggression, a direct comparison cannot be made; however, gender prevalence is in fact comparable in a number of similar studies (e.g., Radliff & Joseph, 2011; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliwer, 2006). This particular study may have found equal experiences across gender because males may have become savvier in inner city schools for a variety of reasons. Fear of repercussions of physically aggressive behavior may be one reason. The possibility of being caught in a physical act of aggression in an inner city school may be considered (a) violation of parole, (b) battery or a misdemeanor that could lead to jail time for previous offenders, (c) stepping on the toes of a gang member without necessarily knowing or intending to do so, and finally, (d) fear that a weapon may cause long-term bodily harm. Instead of physical aggression, males alternatively may have used more RA (or verbal aggression, which was extremely high in the sample), which is known to cause more emotional damage, remain under the radar screen from authorities, and continue a cycle of perpetration.

**Type.** The type of RV most widely cited by this sample included making mean statements, telling lies, and using overt group exclusionary tactics. Gender was not a statistically significant factor in the type of RV experienced, except for reported mean statements experienced by males. What is quite interesting is the fact that all three groups, regardless of race or gender, stated that the most prevalent form of RV that occurred in school was lying. This quantitative finding also was supported by each qualitative interview, as most of the students stated that other students either make up stories about them (lie) or say mean things about them. Notably, one study among the literature addressed the prevalence of overt and covert bullying and victimization among Black and Latino adolescents (Peskin et al., 2006), and found that there was a statistically significant difference between race and ethnicity for the percentage of mean statements made to victims.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note. The instruments to assess relational aggression in the Peskin et al. (2006) study were different than the current study; however, the constructs were similar and thus the authors felt comfortable with the comparison made.

One reason that participants may have reported lying as the most pervasive behavior is that lying is one of the most direct ways to quickly ruin a person's relationships or defame a person's integrity, as it spreads like wildfire in a matter of hours or days. Lying and gossip also send a message to the target that someone is trying to hurt him or her, while at the same time keeping the attacker's identity anonymous. Thus, the bully is less likely to receive punishment for his or her actions. In essence, a person who is lied about is thrown into the mix of the aggressor-victim relationship without choice. The bully remains in a high status power role and the victim is vulnerable. Also, lying may be the most prevalent form of RA used because aggressors may feel lying protects them from victimization. By taking hold of the reins and "facing down (e.g., aggressive defensive tactics)," students are likely to show others that they will spread rumors rather than be the target of them.

### **Teacher Support**

In terms of the specific role that support plays in moderating the negative effects of RV, this study found that teacher support played an equally important moderating role for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender on the impact of RV. Additionally, those students who had medium to high levels of victimization reaped the most benefits of perceived teacher support. This indicates that a supportive figure that provides emotional, instrumental, or general support on school grounds in times of need, or at a minimum is *perceived* to be available, can attenuate depression scores in middle school students. These findings support previous research on perceived teacher support that demonstrated a mitigation of the negative effects of victimization (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Flaspohler, Eflstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Stadler, Feifel, Rohrman, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010; Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010).

Regarding specific supportive attributes and behavior, the most highly rated teacher support items in the quantitative results dealt with informational and instructional support. These findings are supported by previous research that has cited informational and motivational support as more valued by students than emotional support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999). The quantitative results also triangulated with the qualitative findings, which named helpfulness and fairness as the factors that make teachers seem most supportive, and unfairness and unhelpfulness as the primary criticism of unsupportive teachers. Of note in this particular study, the concept of teacher fairness was referenced frequently in the qualitative results, which has been found to be negatively correlated to substance abuse, suicide, risky sexual behavior, and violence (Flaspohler et al., 2009).

However, the emphasis by students on informational and fairness attributes as the most supportive seems to conflict with the notion that teachers enter the profession to mentor students and connect with them on an emotional level (Manuel & Hughes, 2006), rather than merely teaching course material and being "fair." Regardless of this desire by teachers to support students at an emotional level with availability, sympathy, acceptance, and concern (Wills & Shinar, 2000), students consistently fail to mention positive traits about teachers that lend credence to the importance of emotional support. A number of factors could be at play, including the push by school districts to meet criteria for high-stakes testing, overburden of teachers because of the numerous roles they play, or mere lack of motivation because of burn-out. The researchers believe that although students may have shared that they felt supported, there is still information missing on the *how* and the *kind* of support that is provided by teachers. Future qualitative studies, in the form of focus groups, may elicit discussion among students on how



they can be supported by teachers, or what would make them the most comfortable speaking to teachers when bullied.

Overall, student interviewees made more positive statements about teachers' supportive behavior than negative, which may indicate that they tend to see their teachers mostly in a positive light. However, zero negative statements were made about members of other support systems (e.g., friends and family). Interviewees, unsolicited, described negative attributes in some of their teachers, yet, not in their families or peers. This might suggest that they hold their teachers to a higher level of expected support. These students may see teachers as their first line of defense as they are the authority figures in the environment in which they are being victimized. Those teachers that fail in this role may be subject to increased criticism, as they have lost the trust and favor of these students. However, most of this study's participants did not mention that they turned to these teachers for help when bullied; this may be due to a complete lack of faith in their teachers to effectively handle such incidents. Family members and friends, on the other hand, may be viewed as distally related towards providing direct intervention at school, and therefore not held to the same expectation level.

In fact, the participants gave more references of support from peers and family than teachers. This corresponds with previous research showing that beginning in middle school, students perceive teacher support as being significantly lower than peer (classmate) or parental support. Whether or not teachers actually provide less support, or the support is different, or students' development affect how they view the world, the reality is that the nature of the relationship changes between elementary and middle school (Bokhorst et al., 2010). As such, middle school teachers need to understand and address this fact so they can provide differentiated support, better intervention, and be on the active look out for bullying behaviors.

### **Limitations**

**Quantitative analyses.** There are a number of important limitations that must be recognized in this study. First, the sample utilized was an urban minority sample, as purposive sampling was utilized; therefore, the generalizability is quite limited to other populations. Second, given that the area is populated heavily with families who are constantly in transition, it was unclear whether students had been at the school for a short or long period of time. Thus, their perceptions of behavioral nuances at school may have been skewed. Third, the sample size was smaller than expected; thus, with the small sample size, it was more difficult to detect statistically significant findings for the moderator models. This may have accounted for a lack of a three-way interaction for gender, grade, and ethnicity. Moreover, the effect sizes and the  $R^2$ -values may have been larger if the sample size was adequate. Fourth, time and permission granted, the researchers would have liked to translate the survey instruments into Spanish provided the number of Hispanic students who participated in this study was high (many of them were ESOL learners). Therefore, while some of the students may have obtained proficiency in English, they may have resonated better with Spanish versions of the surveys.

**Qualitative analyses.** While the CQR method affords analyses for 8-15 interviews, the breadth of the interviews conducted varied. Thus, soliciting more interviewees would have been better to achieve a better understanding of the results and possibly achieve more general findings. Additionally, member-checking was not possible given students were dismissed from school for summer break by the time initial analyses were conducted. Thus questions that were ambiguous and or required extrapolation were impossible to follow-up upon.

### **Future Research**

Characteristics of victims who are bullied in middle school still remain a bit ambiguous. We recommend more studies address this area so that victim traits may be targeted via intervention and self-help, skills-based courses. Second, the qualitative portion of our study addressed victims' perceptions of bullies; and as such, a hypothesis a posteriori that was developed was that victims' characterizations of bullies are mirror images of traits that they do not like within themselves. The researchers wonder if this hypothesis would also hold true for non-victims and for a larger sample of victims. Another area of future research that is a likely extension of this study is gaining the perspective of bullies on similar issues asked in the qualitative portion of this study. We have addressed issues only from victims' perspectives.

### **Recommendations for Practitioners**

While a full analysis of specific strategies employed by teachers to facilitate caring relationships with their students is outside the scope of this paper, the authors wanted to include some suggestions and references for further reading on this topic.

Albeit basic, some critical ways to build relationships that are taken for granted include getting to know students on deeper levels through caring encounters. Some suggested ways include: asking about important life events such as birthdays, sports games or family members. Another way to build supportive relationships is to be able to perspective take with students. Teachers should be able to quickly "jump in the shoes" of whatever age youth they work with so the youth feels understood and connected with his/her teacher. The ability to do this includes being in touch with social media, pop culture, what transpires on the playground, and common vernacular. A third recommendation is a concept recommended by Hanhimaki and Tirri (2009) called a "critical incident." A "critical incident" is when a teacher issues work that creates ethical reflection and moral emotion. By doing so, the teacher works with the youth to develop skills that include taking the perspective of others, cultivating empathy for a sense of connection to others, and interpreting a situation based on imagining what might happen and who might be affected. In turn, the youth and teacher work conjointly to build camaraderie and enhance well-being. Finally, the school environment cannot be dismissed as being a necessity to feel supported by teachers. The environment must be built by teachers who are ethically sensitive when they teach; who engage common rules and regulations that everyone in the school community acknowledges so as to promote mutual respect and understanding amongst teachers, principals and students, good manners, and an atmosphere of caring. This requires frequent in-service trainings, grade-level teacher meetings, and feedback from students regarding how they feel about the school environment. Other references to learn more about this topic include: Kim and Schallert (2011); Quan-McGimpsey, Kuczunski, and Brophy (2011).

### **Conclusion**

Students rely everyday on their teachers for much more than just academic knowledge. Even though teachers are expressly hired to imbue knowledge upon their students, at the core structure of a teacher is a caring individual that wants to support the growth of another individual. As such, teachers must remember that students rely on their teachers for social support, a shoulder to cry on, and a confidant to share information with when something is going wrong at school or home. If students do not perceive their teachers as supportive and committed to their well-being, students may not have anyone else to turn to in times of distress. As this study has shown,

teachers play a significant role in attenuating depression for youth who have been victimized by relational aggression. This paper serves as a call to promote education for teacher educators, teacher administrators, and teachers on the effects of bullying and relational aggression. Listen to the verbalizations in the hallways. Take time to observe students and their behaviors. Learn about bullying in depth. By implementing teacher education programs that arm teachers with the appropriate tools and strategies to deal with bullies and victims of bullying in schools, teachers may just save one more child from the deleterious effects of this awful pandemic.

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