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Connie Phelps, Ashley Beason-Manes and Amy Lockman

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Article abstract

While considerable research exists on bullying in P-12 schools, few empirical studies address bullying and gifted students. Moreover, the field of Gifted, Talented, and Creative Education lacks single construct studies on covert aggression and gifted students. Also known as relational aggression, covert aggression purposefully manipulates relationships and damages reputations through less obvious or hidden forms of bullying. This exploratory study in a Midwest state analyzed quantitative and qualitative data gathered from 27 gifted adolescent girls on covert aggression instances with intellectual and non-exceptional female peers during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Participants tallied incidents of covert aggression, provided short written comments, and participated in structured group interviews. Of 1037 incidents, covert aggression occurred most prevalently during 7th grade. Participants indicated fewer incidents with their intellectual peers than with non-exceptional peers. Academic topics of intelligence, grades, and name calling formed a cluster of incidents most frequently experienced with intellectual and non-exceptional peers. Participants attributed covert aggression to their differentness from non-exceptional peers. Covert aggression topics of intelligence and grades with intellectual peers seemed linked with negative aspects of competition. Participants found support from intellectual peers at school who provided empathy for their advanced abilities. Prevalence and subjective experience results from both groups indicated gifted adolescent girls encounters with covert aggression impeded development of their giftedness and full inclusion in secondary school environments. Peer support groups that recognize covert aggression behaviors and practice intervention strategies might ameliorate its harmful effects and improve the social-emotional wellness of gifted adolescent girls.

Covert Aggression and Gifted Adolescent Girls

Connie Phelps ¹; Ashley Beason-Manes ²; Amy Lockman ³

¹ Elementary Education, Early Childhood, and Special Education Department,
Emporia State University, USA

² Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit

³ Olathe Public Schools

Abstract

While considerable research exists on bullying in P-12 schools, few empirical studies address bullying and gifted students. Moreover, the field of Gifted, Talented, and Creative Education lacks single construct studies on covert aggression and gifted students. Also known as *relational aggression*, covert aggression purposefully manipulates relationships and damages reputations through less obvious or hidden forms of bullying. This exploratory study in a Midwest state analyzed quantitative and qualitative data gathered from 27 gifted adolescent girls on covert aggression instances with intellectual and non-exceptional female peers during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Participants tallied incidents of covert aggression, provided short written comments, and participated in structured group interviews. Of 1037 incidents, covert aggression occurred most prevalently during 7th grade. Participants indicated fewer incidents with their intellectual peers than with non-exceptional peers. Academic topics of intelligence, grades, and name calling formed a cluster of incidents most frequently experienced with intellectual and non-exceptional peers. Participants attributed covert aggression to their differentness from non-exceptional peers. Covert aggression topics of intelligence and grades with intellectual peers seemed linked with negative aspects of competition. Participants found support from intellectual peers at school who provided empathy for their advanced abilities. Prevalence and subjective experience results from both groups indicated gifted adolescent girls encounters with covert aggression impeded development of their giftedness and full inclusion in secondary school environments. Peer support groups that recognize covert aggression behaviors and practice intervention strategies might ameliorate its harmful effects and improve the social-emotional wellness of gifted adolescent girls.

Keywords: Covert aggression; relational aggression; bullying; gifted girls; adolescents.

Covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls

Intervention and prevention programs to counter bullying behaviors in P-12 education proliferated in the new millennium, perhaps due to media attention that captured specific instances across the United States. Cross (2001a) found the media portrayed schools as unsafe places in the minds of children. Olweus (2003) observed bullying prevention gained momentum in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Despite interventions, some particularly persistent forms of bullying such as cyberbullying continued to rise (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Due to the ongoing concern of bullying in P-12 schools and its detrimental effects on students and the learning environment, administrators, counselors, and teachers worked together to prevent, identify, and eliminate bullying in P-12 schools. While research addressed prevalence, participants, and impact of bullying, few studies informed practices on bullying and gifted students in P-12 schools.

Instances of bullying involve a bully and a victim when an imbalance of power dynamic exists. According to Olweus (2003), a bully “intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort on someone else” (p. 12). The recipient of the injury or discomfort then becomes the victim. Definitions of “bullies” vary in their inclusiveness of aggressive behaviors. For example, Cross (2001b) provided a comprehensive definition of a bully as “a person who uses any approach including, but not limited to, intimidation (physical, emotional, verbal), positional authority, relational authority, or societal authority to create limiting effects on another’s behaviors, thoughts, or feelings” (p. 36). Olweus (2003) described bullying as “negative actions” that might include physical contact or verbal interactions, but it also occurred through more indirect means such as “making mean faces or gestures, spreading rumors, or excluding someone from a group” (p. 13).

In 1995, Crick and Grotpeter coined the term *relationship aggression* “to capture behaviors that used relationship manipulation to hurt or harm others, such as malicious gossip, social exclusion, and threats of friendship withdrawal” (as cited in Cicchetti & Murray-Close, 2014, p. 557). In this study, we limited bullying to indirect forms of negative behaviors known as *covert aggression* or *relational aggression*. We defined covert aggression as incidents when individuals manipulate relationships as an attempt to control power among peers. Specific examples of covert aggression included talking behind someone’s back, spreading rumors, and the pretense of friendship.

Research on bullying in P-12 school environments examined entire student groups by age, grade level, or gender from the perspective of social science, education, psychology, and counseling. Most studies proposed preventative interventions in schools for general education student populations. Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) examined literature on bullying and found no studies on gifted students. Given the need for empirical studies on gifted students and relational forms of bullying, we examined gifted adolescent girls and covert aggression with intellectual and non-exceptional peers during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. As a result, we hoped to increase awareness of harmful covert aggression behaviors in both groups and gain insight on ways to create safe and inclusive environments in secondary schools where gifted adolescent girls can achieve their academic potential.

Literature review

Studies on bullying within the general student population often sampled a wide range of grade levels, including lower elementary, upper elementary, middle/junior high, and high school age groups. Estell et al. (2009) found “late elementary school years are a time when classroom social dynamics may be particularly important to bullying and victimization” (p. 136). They found social dynamics played an important role in the culture of bullying since popularity often determined social groups and the subsequent victimization of classmates. Students who identified with aggressive peers increased the possibility of others considering them bullies because of those associations.

Given few empirical studies on bullying and giftedness, our review includes literature on bullying and adolescents as contextual background for gifted adolescent girls and covert aggression. Our literature review includes bullying and adolescent girls, bullying and gifted adolescents, and covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls. We conclude this section with recommended prevention and intervention strategies for covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls.

Bullying and adolescent girls

Coloroso (2011) compared bullying to a tragic play with three characters who act in bully, bullied, and bystander roles. Bullies initiate aggression supported by bystanders who actively support actions against the target. Although bullying generally begins with verbal aggression, boys may escalate violence through physical behaviors while girls advance to relational aggression as a more powerful form of bullying (Coloroso, 2015). Girls as young as four and a half to five years old use gossip, rumor, exclusion or shunning intentionally as relational aggression. In a 1995 study cited more than 3000 times, Crick and Grotpeter found girls frequently used relational aggression, and they targeted peers through relational rather than physical aggressive behaviors (as cited in Cicchetti & Murray-Close, 2014).

According to Pipher, adolescent girls “come of age in a poisonous girl hurting culture” (Gilliam, 2012). Based on her clinical practice with adolescent girls, Pipher (1994) examined case studies of adolescent girls in *Reviving Ophelia*. She described adolescent girls with unmet needs in the American culture that left them vulnerable to negative effects of peer and societal pressure. For example, when “Monica” experienced bullying about her weight at school, she became depressed. Pipher counseled Monica to maintain her true self and adjust to adolescence by joining clubs and exercising. Former high school teacher Wellman took inspiration from Pipher’s work and founded the *Ophelia Project* to change the “girl-poisoning culture” (Jarvik, 2004). As Wellman listened to adolescent girls, she discovered they experienced relational aggression, both as perpetrators and victims. Consequently, the Ophelia Project offered the Kids in the Middle training program to

empower up to 80% of middle school students to disrupt bullying dynamics between perpetrators and victims.

The 25th anniversary edition of *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher & Pipher Gilliam, 2019) described adolescent girls as digital natives who experienced depression, isolation, and anxiety. Coming of age during public school shootings and lockdowns, this generation expressed concerns about personal safety. As heavy social media users, they felt a need to remain connected and kept their personal devices on all night (Martin, 2019).

Tabor and Woloshyn (2011) examined bullying within popular adolescent literature. They noted characters presented in television shows, movies, and books often associated female beauty with cruelty and meanness. Their study showed “popularity is largely defined by social status which is a primary concern for all the main characters ... the most popular characters are those who are physically attractive with an ideal body image” (p. 230). They found striking similarities between the characterization of adolescent girls and school social structures in fiction where adolescents girls encountered bullying behaviors ranging from relational to physical aggression in schools.

Although the traditional definition of bullying might conjure up the physicality of older boys stuffing younger boys in school lockers, girls engage in bullying as well. Peterson and Ray (2006a) reported, “a higher percentage of gifted males than gifted in this study were bullied and were bullies” (p. 160). However, their study included nine types of overt aggression including name-calling, pushing/shoving and teasing with fewer covert types of aggression often associated with female bullying behaviors. Peterson and Ray found overt bullying and gifted girls peaked in 5th grade through 8th grade at 38%-39% prevalence rates. Instances of traditional bullying of gifted girls peaked with two to three experiences in 6th through 8th grades with prevalence rates of 15%-16% (p. 155).

Tabor and Woloshyn (2011) examined bullying portrayed in adolescent literature and indicated boys and girls engaged in and responded to bullying experiences differently. Male characters engaged primarily in overt, physical types of bullying. However, *mean girls* engaged in both overt bullying such as tripping and shoving as well as covert aggression by making snide comments, excluding certain girls, and humiliating their victims. Tabor and Woloshyn examined fictional characters who seemed to reflect adolescent culture today:

... bullying by boys and girls is represented in very different ways, with the boys engaging in physical bullying that polices the way boys should act (i.e., tough, strong, not girly) and the girls in exclusion and humiliation that polices the way girls should look (i.e., attractive, fashionable). This bullying has pervasive effects on the self-esteem and self-concepts of the main characters, leaving them feeling vulnerable and self-conscious. These representations very much mirror contemporary popular discussions about bullies and mean girls. (p. 239)

Underwood (2003) researched socialization experiences of girls from infancy through adolescence. She found the developmental process of girls demonstrated relational aggression behaviors such as gossip, manipulating friendships, and social exclusion as expressions of anger and aggression. Moreover, social aggression may occur as indirect and direct forms, and these behaviors serve proactive purposes such as improving one's social standing or entertainment value of manipulating others (p. 31).

Bullying and gifted adolescents

Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) conducted quantitative and qualitative studies on bullying with 8th grade gifted students that examined their roles as both bullies and victims. According to Estell et al. (2009), gifted students “tend to have patterns of social behavior, peer acceptance, and peer affiliations that are distinct” (p. 137) from their chronological age peers in general education. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found the gifted student victimization related more to *differentness* than intellectual ability (p. 258). For example, a gifted student participant in the subjective experience study suggested jealousy as a possible cause for bullying gifted students faced compared when to their non-exceptional peers (p. 257). They found “teasing about intelligence and grades was at its peak in 7th and 8th grades, reflecting the literature and perhaps reflecting increasing awareness of achievement

differences in the peer culture” (2006b, p. 160). Moreover, emotional impact peaked in 5th (13%) and 6th (11%) grades with ratings of *a lot* and statistical significance for intelligence highest in 7th grade (p. 155). Peters and Bain (2011) suggested different reasons for the victimization of gifted students and their non-exceptional peers, as “gifted students were rated as less aggressive and less likely to be victims of aggression compared to the non-gifted students” (p. 628).

Wood and Craigen (2011) found gifted students faced a choice between embracing their intellectual ability and enjoying social popularity among their peers. They stated gifted students might “experience frustration, anger, and disappointment in their quest to find like-minded peers or in response to being misunderstood and rejected by the same-age peers” (p. 844). Estell et al. (2009) indicated gifted students as likely to bully or to experience bullying by their intellectual peers, and their non-exceptional peers as more likely to bully and to encounter bullying. Moreover, teachers tended to view gifted students more prominently within the school’s social culture and considered them less likely to bully than their non-exceptional peers. Peterson and Ray (2006b) reported, “[G]iftedness is associated with a unique vulnerability to bullying ... but [gifted victims] assume responsibility for resolving it themselves” (p. 257). Their intellectual ability to resolve conflicts and apply coping strategies may explain why educators often perceived gifted students either less likely as perpetrators or as victims of bullying behaviors.

Covert aggression and gifted adolescents

Research suggests gifted students use relational aggression skillfully as a preferred strategy due to their advanced cognitive abilities (Ogurlu, 2015; Peairs et al., 2019; Pelchar & Bain, 2014). Ogurlu investigated the relationship of ostracism and intelligence with middle school gifted students using the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (Revised Form). Results in this preliminary study indicated higher ostracism in 8th grade than 6th and 7th grades and showed similar results for girls and boys. However, he found a positive correlation between intelligence and ostracism. Underwood (2003) suggested subtle and complex relational aggression behaviors may require high intelligence. Moreover, according to Kaukiainen et al., indirect aggression correlated with social intelligence in adolescents (as cited in Underwood, 2003, p. 186). Lee et al. (2012) researched interpersonal competencies and peer relationships of gifted adolescents and reported intellectually gifted students, particularly girls, lost earlier popular social status by age 13 as peers increasingly devalued their intellectual accomplishments throughout high school. These students reported more difficulty making and maintaining friendships than during elementary school years (p. 92).

Covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls

Early studies on peer victimization limited topics to bullying among boys and overt aggression (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). However, using peer and self-report instruments, Crick and Bigbee found girls more often suffered from relational than overt aggression. Although covert aggression occurs in all student groups, few studies examine relational or covert aggression and its consequences in schools. A possible explanation for the lack of studies might relate to the less obvious and non-physical form of bullying that parents and school officials might miss. Olweus (2003) considered less overt forms of bullying “as harmful and distressing as more direct and open forms of harassment” (p. 13). Olweus found physical bullying occurred far less frequently among all groups of school-aged girls as they more often engaged in negative behaviors such as excluding individuals from social groups or occasions, manipulating friendships, and spreading rumors about one another. Peterson and Ray (2006b) stated 8th grade gifted students seemed reluctant to classify nonphysical teasing and name-calling as bullying; however, gifted students reported extreme distress from nonphysical aggression with the realization that verbal bullying took its toll (p. 259).

Prevention and intervention strategies

Studies on bullying in grades P-12 populations often recommended prevention and intervention strategies for homes, schools, and communities. These strategies included increasing awareness that could make a difference in the lives of students who experienced bullying. Cross (2001b) recommended an expanded and more inclusive definition of bullying with both overt and

covert negative behaviors and both intentional and unintentional victimization. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found the most helpful coping strategies, in descending order, included “family, friends, self, no one, teachers, personal belongings, God, and counselors” (p. 159). Their responses indicated gifted students often coped with their bullying experiences without the assistance of teachers or counselors. Their prioritization suggested school officials need to increase vigilance that prevents covert aggression and intervene more effectively when it occurs. Peairs (2011) emphasized heightened intervention for victimized gifted adolescents, especially needed as a safe learning environment to develop their extraordinary potential.

Grade level transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school may further layer bullying experiences for children and adolescents. Peterson and Ray (2006a) reported the most prevalence of bullying occurred during 6th grade, traditionally the first year in middle school. Pelchar et al. (2014) used the Reynolds Bully—Victimization Scales (BVS) to measure bullying behaviors from the past month with 4th and 5th grade students who transitioned from elementary to middle school. Although their mismatch with traditional transition years yielded inconsistent results, school support staff could implement the BVS to screen for bullying issues that occur during grade level transitions from elementary, middle, and high schools.

Peterson and Ray (2006b) observed, “... only adults have the power to address the power imbalance inherent in bullying and to create prevention programs” (p. 265). They suggested gifted facilitators and school counselors establish small groups or support groups that address issues for both bullies and victims in safe environments. These groups “can help children to improve interpersonal skills, acknowledge the perspectives of others, solve social problems, express feelings, feel heard, and interact more effectively with peers” (p. 162). Cross (2001b) recommended gifted facilitators, classroom teachers, school counselors, principals, and parents recognize their intervention role with bullying both inside and outside of school because victims of bullying needed adult advocates to help them cope with experiences of victimization.

Allen (2020) used journey maps combined with interviews during case study research on bullying with six middle school gifted students. Student journey maps illustrated bullying as complex lived experiences. Interview questions clarified previous responses with students’ bully histories. For example, all students found relational aggression problematic at their middle school, and their experiences with covert aggression included cyberbullying and gossiping (p. 168). In one instance, the interview disclosed instances of gifted students bullying teachers (p. 169). Allen suggested the process could help introverted gifted students who internalize harm from bullying that might go undetected (p. 32).

Purpose of study

Despite media attention from the *Mean Girls* movie and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* self-help book (Wiseman, 2016), little research on bullying addressed P-12 gifted populations. Moreover, few studies examined covert aggression in broadly defined student groups. Some researchers (Robinson & Noble, 1991; Webb, 2016) expressed concern with gifted students at risk for developing internalized disorders such as depression and anxiety in response to social stressors. Two landmark studies (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) researched gifted students and traditional forms of bullying. Although gifted facilitators shared informal, anecdotal observations suggesting gifted adolescent girls experienced covert aggression at school, the research literature lacked studies on gifted adolescent girls and their subjective experiences with covert aggression in secondary schools.

To explore the covert aggression phenomenon among gifted adolescent girls, we asked two research questions. The first question examined the prevalence of covert aggression in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, and the second question evaluated the subjective experience of gifted adolescent girls with covert aggression:

- (a) How many instances of covert aggression did gifted adolescent girls report for eight specific topics between gifted girls and gifted girls (GG/GG) and non-exceptional peers (GG/NG) during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades?

- (b) How did gifted adolescent girls view their subjective experience of covert aggression with GG/GG and NG/GG during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades?

We anticipated (a) lower prevalence of covert aggression between GG/GG than GG/NG groups, and (b) the subjective experiences of gifted adolescent girls with covert aggression targeted intelligence and grade topics in GG/GG and GG/NG groups.

Methodology

The primary investigator invited two graduate students enrolled in a university Gifted, Talented, and Creative program while employed full-time as gifted facilitators to participate in field research. The primary investigator required co-researchers to secure written school administrative approval from their respective middle and high schools, then applied to the university institutional research board to work with human subjects. When approved, the gifted facilitators distributed informed consent forms that stated the purpose of study, explained the research procedure, and ensured privacy for each participant. The consent form assured participants that could withdraw from the study at any point without reprisal or penalty. Participants under the age of 18 returned consent forms signed by their parent or guardian prior to the study.

Participants

Given the less physical nature of covert aggression and its association with adolescent girls, we selected gifted adolescent girls only for the study. The two gifted facilitators invited all identified gifted girls in two schools located in the Midwest to participate in the study. All participants received an equal chance of selection. Although 30 subjects planned to participate, due to absences, this study reports results for 27 subjects who completed both the Reflective Questionnaire and participated in a Structured Group Interview. A suburban middle school of approximately 1000 students included only 7th and 8th grades, and 11 identified gifted girls participated in the study. A suburban high school with about 550 students included identified gifted girls in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. The 27 participants ranged in age from 12 to 18 years. The two study samples came from suburban schools located in two different parts of the state.

Procedure

The quantitative study consisted of participant tallies to number of instances for eight topics of covert aggression, both observed or experienced, in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades with GG/GG and GG/NG groups for items one and two. The qualitative component included short written responses for items 3 through 10 followed by Structured Group Interviews to probe item responses. Participants contributed item comments optionally, and they engaged in group discussions voluntarily without pressure to do so.

The gifted facilitators supervised their groups of participants who completed the Reflective Questionnaire individually and anonymously in the resource room during their seminar class period. All participants received the same definition and explanation of *covert aggression*, and all participants received the same instructions to complete the Reflective Questionnaire. Participants tallied instances between GG/GG and GG/NG for items 1 and 2, respectively, and wrote optional comments for items 3-10. The gifted facilitators checked questionnaires for completion of demographic information and items one and two. They then coded individual questionnaires by grade level and participant number.

The research team analyzed Reflective Questionnaires items 1 and 2 for quantitative prevalence of covert aggression and items 3-10 as the basis for the qualitative subjective experience. The gifted facilitators from each school arranged Structured Group Interviews where participants sat in a semi-circle of chairs in the familiarity of their resource room with a closed door. They spoke without coercion or identifying information other than their grade level and school name. To encourage open discussion on potentially sensitive topics, the primary researcher asked questions while the gifted facilitator typed participant comments on a notebook computer without identifying information than the coded grade level and participant number.

Instruments

Reflective questionnaire

The primary researcher requested and received an electronic copy of the Peterson and Ray survey (2006a, 2006b) as a guide for the present study. Because covert aggression occurs less openly and possibly more frequently than traditional bullying, we included eight potentially covert topics: grades, intelligence, name calling, personal appearance, family, social status, possessions, and other (specify). Given the smaller participant size, we specified grade levels represented in the two secondary level schools: 7th and 8th grades in the middle school, and 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th from the high school. The study targeted reflective covert aggression incidences experienced during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades as viable developmental periods from a social perspective. We distinguished prevalence for two groups, GG/GG and GG/NG, in items one and two, respectively.

The Reflective Questionnaire required only the participant's age, grade level, and gender without physical descriptions or family member status. The introduction defined *covert aggression* as incidents "when individuals manipulate relationships as an attempt to control power among peers." Specific examples of covert aggression included talking behind someone's back, spreading rumors or gossip, and pretended friendship. The written instructions asked participants to tally the number of instances of covert aggression, both experienced and observed, as separate columns that implied bullied and bystander roles to gain a broader sense of prevalence. Subjective written response items three, four, and five identified the worst instance of covert aggression; its effect on their lives; and whether they told anyone and the subsequent response, if any, to their telling someone. Items six, seven, eight, and nine explored patterns and trends and similarities and differences for incidences of covert aggression between GG/GG and GG/NG groups. Participants could add other information for item 10, if they wished to do so. The primary researcher tested the Reflective Questionnaire for understanding of covert aggression behaviors, the eight topics, and clarity of procedure with two groups of identified gifted students from a local middle and high schools. Both groups completed the questionnaire voluntarily and followed the protocol appropriately.

Structured group interview

The Reflective Questionnaire gathered qualitative data on participants' subjective experience from items 3 through 10 as the basis for Structured Group Interview questions. The primary researcher and gifted facilitators probed these responses for the worst incident, effect on their lives, and coping strategies. Questions also addressed patterns and trends and similarities and differences between GG/GG and GG/NG groups. For example, an interview question that emerged from short written narrative responses related to hazing in the GG/GG group at the high school level when new girls arrived from another school and began gifted services with an established group of gifted girls.

Results

Our first study question examined the prevalence of covert aggression in eight topics between GG/GG and GG/NG groups in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. In this exploratory study, we aggregated observed and experienced tallies to capture the magnitude of covert aggression rather than distinguishing bullying, bullied, and bystander roles (see Appendix A items 1 and 2). We analyzed prevalence by topic, group and topic, and group and grade level (see Figures 1-3).

Prevalence by topic

We aggregated incidents in GG/GG and GG/NG groups during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades for a total of 1037 instances. The most prevalent topics included intelligence ($N = 187$), name calling ($N = 187$), and grades ($N = 185$). With a combined 54% prevalence in this academic ability triad, topics highlighted differentness in intelligence and academic ability in the GG/NG group and academic competitiveness in the GG/GG group. At 42% prevalence, social status ($N = 170$), appearance ($N = 158$), and possessions ($N = 111$) addressed more traditional bullying topics among girls unrelated to academics or intelligence. Family ($N = 39$) scored lowest with 4% prevalence, perhaps as a less observable in schools (see Figure 1).

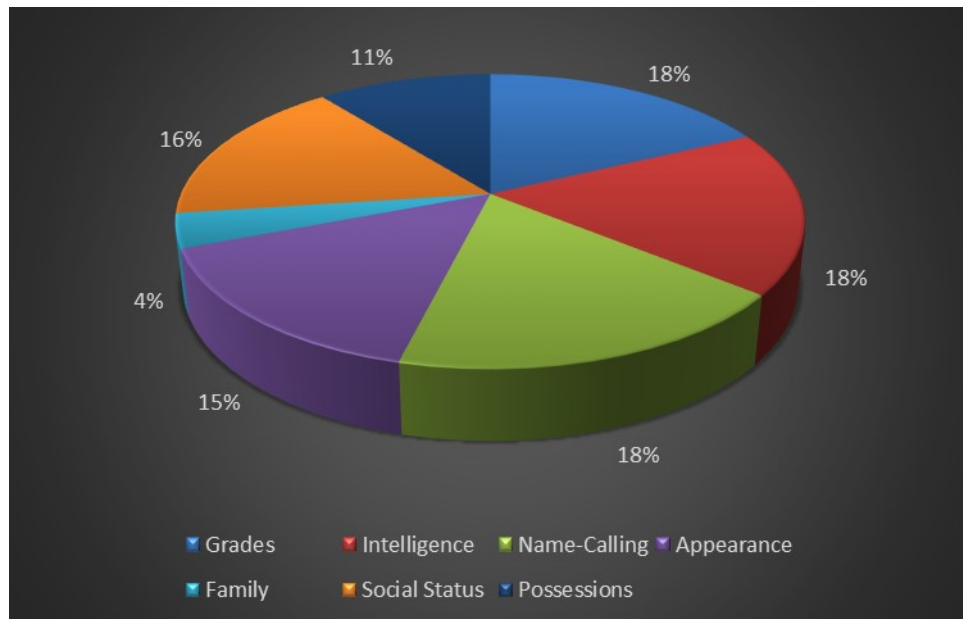


Figure 1: Prevalence by topic.

Prevalence by group and topic

We examined 1037 incidents by topic and group. The GG/NG ($N = 672$; 65%) group showed prevalence with nearly twice as many instances as the GG/GG group ($N = 365$; 35%). Name-calling ($N = 126$; 19%) scored highest in the GG/NG group, and intelligence ($N = 85$; 23%) tallied the most incidents in the GG/GG group. Social status ($N = 123$; 18%) ranked next in the GG/NG group, and grades ($N = 67$; 24%) scored second in the GG/GG group. A distinction between GG/GG and GG/NG groups emerged with intelligence and grades topics ($N = 153$; 53%) prevalent in the GG/GG group, and name-calling and social status ($N = 249$; 37%) more prominent in the GG/NG group. Traditional topics of appearance, possessions and family topics ranked lowest. When combined by group, GG/GG ($N = 105$; 34%) and GG/NG ($N = 203$; 66%), traditional topics showed 30% prevalence (see Figure 2).

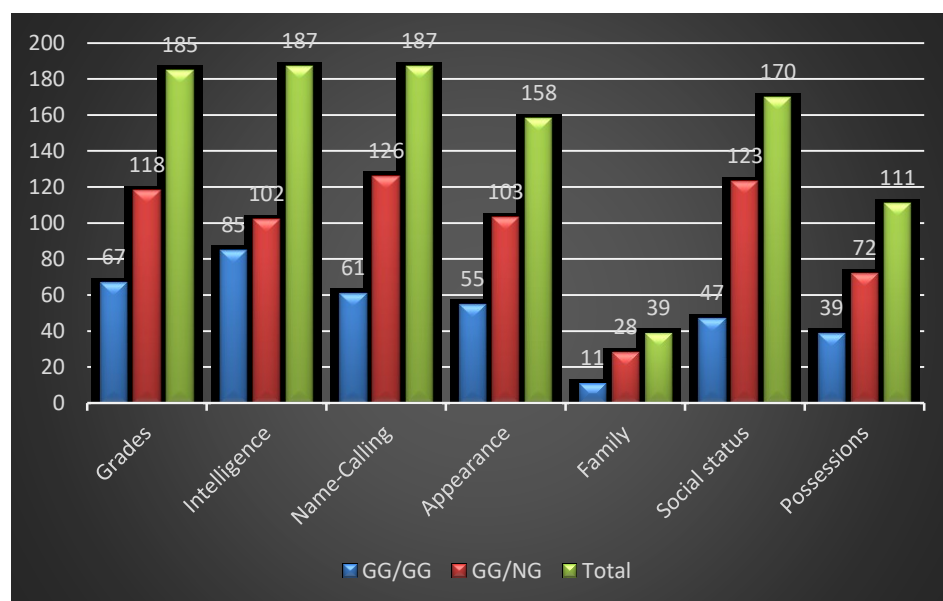


Figure 2: Prevalence by group and topic.

Prevalence by group and grade level

We investigated covert aggression experienced during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades in GG/GG and GG/NG groups. Participants reported the most incidents during 7th grade ($N = 393$; 38%) in both GG/GG ($N = 138$; 35%) and GG/NG ($N = 255$; 65%) groups. Sixth grade ranked second ($N = 329$; 32%) in the GG/GG ($N = 110$; 33%) and GG/NG ($N = 219$; 67%) groups. Eighth grade ($N = 315$; 30%) showed the lowest prevalence in GG/GG ($N = 117$; 37%) and GG/NG ($N = 198$; 63%) groups. The prevalence of incidents showed consistency with more incidents reported in the GG/NG than GG/GG group in all three grades. Percentage differences between the GG/GG and GG/NG groups ranged from 30% to 34% and 26% in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, respectively (see Figure 3).

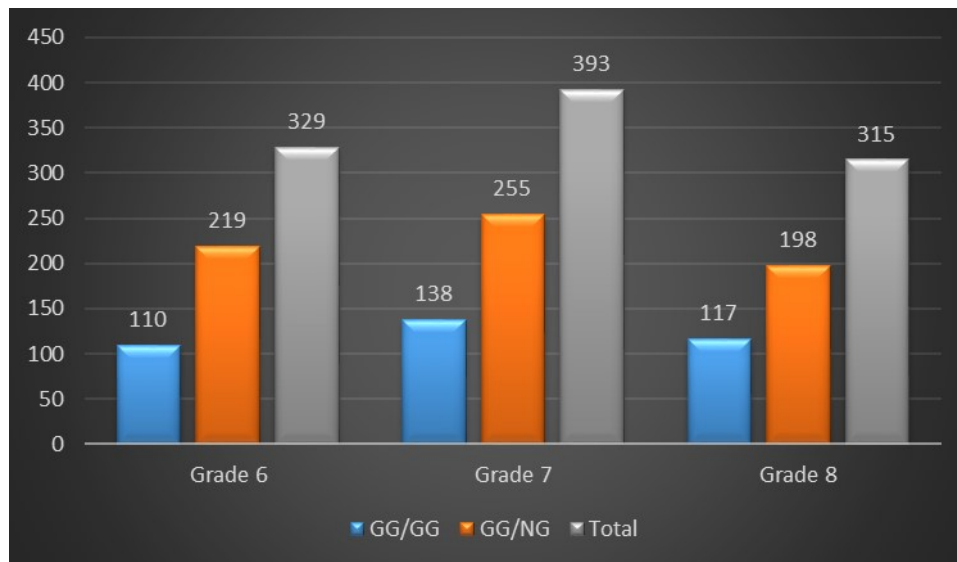


Figure 3: Prevalence by group and grade.

Subjective experience

Our second question examined how gifted adolescent girls viewed their subjective experience of covert aggression with GG/GG and NG/GG during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. We explored the subjective experience through Reflective Questionnaire short written responses for items 3-10 and Structured Group Interview comments based on short written responses. We organized short written responses by participant from 7th grade to 12th grade. Reflective responses addressed 6th, 7th, and 8th grades from participants in 7th through 12th grades (see Appendix A).

Reflective questionnaire

Item Three. Participants identified the worst instance of covert aggression experienced in GG/GG and GG/NG groups during 6th through 8th grades. Four participants from 7th and 8th grades related feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment when going to or coming from the resource room. “The automatically think you’re in ISS [In School Suspension] or in trouble if you have to leave the lunchroom. My friends and I joke that I’m on my way to ISS each time I go for gifted.” Seven participants from 7th and 8th grades indicated “nothing really bad” or “the normal stuff.” An 8th grade participant stated, “I didn’t really see anything that bad. I came from a different school, and it wasn’t that bad there either.” Six participants from 7th, 8th, and 9th grades reported name-calling such as *geeks*, *nerds*, or *retards* and talking about people behind their backs in the GG/NG group. A 11th grade participant observed gifted kids who ganged up on another gifted girl by calling her names in French that she was unable to understand. A 11th grade participant commented that popular girls asked, “Why’d all the nerds dress up for Nerd Day?” Another 11th grade participant indicated, “[N]ew kids to the program were hazed if they were too weird. Regular kids were instantly liked.” A 12th participant experienced jealousy from non-exceptional peers “who accused us of getting to do special stuff and extra activities.”

Item Four. Participants commented on the effect of the worst experience of covert aggression on their lives. A 7th grade participant specified “talking behind people’s backs” and felt glad that “good friends who don’t do that to me.” An 8th grade participant indicated she and her friends talked about the embarrassment they felt when they “had to walk in front of everyone to leave and go to gifted.” However, another 8th grade participant and her friends learned to “joke that I’m on my way to ISS each time I go for gifted.” Other grade eight girls felt hurt because “some popular girls called us retards.” Another 9th grade gifted girl stated, “I’ve been called a nerd before, and it wasn’t meant nicely.” A 9th grade participant felt embarrassed by her giftedness and tried to hide her intelligence. A 10th grade gifted girl “learned not to push the gifted things onto people and to not identify myself as gifted.” Another 10th grade girl stated, “I have breakdowns when I don’t perform as well as some other students.”

Item Five. Only one participant in 7th grade told anyone about the worst incident of covert aggression. She talked casually to her mother at home who “helped me think about what I would do in that situation.” Four participants in grades seven and eight indicated they talked among themselves without reporting covert aggression incidents. A 10th grade participant stated, others “may have known, but I would only tell if asked.”

Items Six Through Nine. This set of four items explored patterns and trends and similarities and differences in GG/NG and GG/NG groups. Item 10 asked for further comments on an optional basis, all participants left this item blank. Participants in high school commented more frequently on these items than middle school participants. A grade 10 participant stated, “[W]e [gifted girls] understand that other kids have talents in other areas.” Another 10th grade participant found if “you do badly on schoolwork with gifted girls,” they empathize with feelings of failure because they’ve been there before too.” A 12th grade participant summarized trends and patterns in covert aggression as whoever is smarter in the GG/GG group and more personal or material things in the GG/NG group. Another 12th grade participant stated, “[A]ggression between gifted girls is usually a challenge over who is smarter.” Another 12th grade gifted girl found “gifted boys and girls were always recognized as the ‘smart kids,’ and we all stuck together.” A 12th grade gifted girl stated, “[M]y gifted friends were always around to help me with any problem.”

Regarding GG/NG interactions, an 8th grade participant stated, “[M]y friends and I aren’t cool.” When hearing from her friends of name-calling incidents, she stated, “[T]hey don’t realize how much it hurts people’s feelings.” A 12th grade participant stated, “[N]on-gifted girls seem to experience more drama.” Another grade 12th grade gifted girl observed, “[G]ifted and non-exceptional girls, the aggression is over more personal or material things.” Yet another 12th grade girl found “non-exceptional girls would always compare their grades to ours. If someone got a higher score than you on a test or worksheet, they would brag about it” (see Appendix B).

Structured group interviews

Middle school grades 7-8. Nearly all middle school participants responded during the Structured Group Interview. Their comments provided personal details about covert aggression experiences, compared experienced between the two groups, and provided reasons for differences between the two exceptional groups. For example, one middle school respondent philosophically attributed differences between the two groups to common interests. When GG/GG formed groups with common interests, they might avoid other groups; however, they did not fight.

The transition from elementary school to middle school seemed to place more distance between the gifted girls and their non-exceptional peers. Most respondents attributed incidents between GG/NG to perceived academic difference. However, exclusion and general unfriendliness surfaced in both groups with the observation that “gifted girls are better at not showing their aggression obviously.” Participants approached the subject practically as, “saying mean things and spreading rumors happens.” Social groups formed in middle school based on popularity because “you can’t like everyone at school.” Although respondents indicated they enjoyed the camaraderie with their intellectual peers, “the pressure brought on by grades creates more competition. ... We all get picked on, no matter what.”

High school grades 9-12. Participants in the high school Structured Group Interview perceived incidents between GG/NG occurred because the non-exceptional girls “didn’t understand the purpose of [the] gifted program, and they thought it was unfair that we got to do special things.” Newness to high school created difficulties for a gifted girl and her non-exceptional peers: “No one would talk to me for weeks ... the only thing they knew about me was I was going to the gifted classroom. They thought I was a smarty-pants and stuck up.” When the primary investigator inquired about hazing new girls in the gifted classroom, the girls laughed. “We were a group, and we didn’t always include new kids in gifted class. This one girl was just ditzzy. We liked things the way they were.” The new student found “even the gifted kids constantly questioned and second-guessed me. I had to prove myself to be associated with the gifted.”

High school participants viewed themselves as very competitive yet supportive of each other in the gifted classroom. However, one participant stated, “gifted girls do participate in bullying. Looking back, they feel bad.” They found boys liked smart girls, although some boys felt intimidated by gifted girls. One participant recalled experiences from 7th grade when her behaviors caused concern.

I was not the perfect student ... gifted girls started asking me if I really belonged in here. I undermined myself and never thought I was really good enough. I still don’t. The high school gifted girls understood academic expectations and acted accordingly. Since I wouldn’t let anyone cheat off me, I was called stuck up.

Another high school girl was “called the teacher’s favorite. Girls would tell me you don’t even work hard, and the teacher gives you a good grade just because she likes you. I told them I work hard for my grades.” A high school girl inquired, “[I]s bullying the same as covert aggression? Girls are supposed to be nice and not get physical, so girls are sneakier.” It appeared GG/GG experienced incidents of covert aggression related to how well they fit into the resource room while incidents in the GG/NG group related to academic achievement or perceived privilege related to placement in the gifted program.

Discussion

We selected “covert aggression” (Olson et al., 2013; Simon, 2010) to emphasize the indirect and hidden nature of these externalizing behaviors while associating them with the harmful effects of overt aggression in traditional forms of bullying. However, research studies also use “social” (Underwood, 2003) and “relational” (Crick & Bigbee, 1998) to describe purposeful manipulative aggression. Beginning in the cradle, girls experience cultural and socializing influences on the expression of anger and aggression that support social aggression as purposeful behavior during adolescence to gain social status or enjoyment of manipulating relationships (Underwood, 2003). Underwood also suggested that more subtle and complex aggression may require high intelligence. Grade level transitions from elementary, middle, and high schools may pose additional vulnerability for adolescents (Pelchar et al., 2014; Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b). Popular literature (Colaroso, 2011; Pipher, 1994, 2019; Wiseman, 2016) associates relational aggression with adolescent girls. However, Nishioka et al. (2011) found 41-48% of girls and 31-42% of boys reported relational victimization during the previous month, and 21-28% of girls and 20-24% of boys perpetuated acts of relational aggression during the past month.

Prevalence of covert aggression

Based on the Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) results, we anticipated higher prevalence of covert aggression between GG/NG than GG/GG groups. Our sample group reported covert aggression topics most often emphasized their differentness from non-exceptional peers and competitiveness with intellectual peers, i.e., intelligence, name-calling, and grades (54%).

Targeted academic strengths

According to Wiseman, grown women vividly recount the meanness of adolescent girls from 7th grade as if those things had happened yesterday (as cited in Tawa, 2002). Clustered as academic

topics (54%), name calling such as “geek” and “nerd,” intelligence, and grades targeted “differentness” during middle school grades. A traditional bullying topic cluster of appearance, social status, possessions, and family collectively occurred less prevalently (46%). How might 599 incidences referencing the academic topic cluster occur for 27 participants during 6th, 7th, and 8th grades? On average, participants would experience 21 academic cluster topics during middle school grades. Schools could anticipate an average of 6 academic topic cluster incidents each week throughout 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Prevalence by topic suggests gifted adolescent girls will experience externalizing covert aggressive behaviors during their middle school years. These purposefully manipulative behaviors target the academic strengths that distinguish intellectually and academically gifted adolescent girls in both GG/GG and GG/NG groups (see Figure 1).

Harmful social interactions

Simmons (2010) described the verbal and mental torment of “extreme bullying” when adolescent girls bullied “friends” who otherwise feared isolation and rejection. Thwala et al. (2018) advocated urgent intervention for adolescent girls susceptible to bullying in schools as places of loneliness and isolation. As anticipated in this study, participants reported more incidents of covert aggression between GG/NG than GG/GG classmates in all eight topics. Moreover, all eight topics ranked similarly within both groups. With 346 academic cluster topic incidents in the GG/NG group, participants could average 13 incidents compared to 213 academic cluster topic incidents averaging 8 incidents in the GG/GG group during middle school. When averaged for a 36-week school year, schools could anticipate 3 academic cluster topic incidents in the GG/NG group and 2 incidents in the GG/GG group during middle school grades. Prevalence by group and topic highlighted harmful social interactions with name-calling (36%) the most prevalent academic cluster topic in the GG/NG group and intelligence (40%) ranking highest in the GG/GG group. Since covert aggression topics cluster around academic strengths in both groups, social interactions with intellectual and non-exceptional peers could threaten development of academic potential in special education and general education settings (see Figure 2).

Vulnerability during transitions

Olson et al. (2013) reported externalized behaviors including covert aggression significantly increased from kindergarten through 2nd grade, 3rd to 5th grade, and 6th to 8th grade developmental periods. In this study, prevalence of covert aggression peaked during 7th grade ($N = 393$; 38%) with 65% ($N = 255$) in the GG/NG group and 35% ($N = 138$) in the GG/GG group. The middle school in our study included only 7th and 8th grades, so this prevalence may reflect the social disadvantage adolescents experience as the new kids on the block. It also supports previous research (Pelchar, 2014; Peterson, 2006a, 2006b) cautioning vulnerability during grade level transitions between elementary and middle school. Hurley (2018) found girls experience higher rates of relational aggression in 5th through 8th grades; however, these behaviors also trickle downward to younger grades as early as preschool.

Subjective experience of covert aggression

Our second research question explored how gifted adolescent girls experience covert aggression with their intellectual and non-exceptional peers in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. We anticipated covert aggression experiences targeted academic strengths of intelligence and grades. Jumper (2009) suggested gifted adolescents experience bullying differently than other children due to their unique characteristics and sensitivities. For example, high levels of intelligence, advanced verbal ability and critical thinking skills often characterize giftedness. We found participants tended to minimize instances as a social norm – “nothing really bad” – and rarely reported incidents, and then only to friends, a mother, or if asked. This trend suggests gifted adolescent girls might rely on their intelligence, verbal skills, and problem-solving abilities to mitigate academic difficulties, problems, and challenges they faced without seeking external assistance from teachers, counselors, or administrators. A common theme throughout subjective experience comments in this study referenced the academic ability triad of intelligence, name calling, and grades topics.

Devaluing academic strengths

Reflective Questionnaire short written comments and Structured Interviews indicated participants felt embarrassed entering and leaving the lunchroom for gifted services. While some girls joked among themselves about going to In School Suspension, others tried to hide their intelligence and avoid identifying with gifted classmates. Some participants possessed sufficient awareness and insight by attributing covert aggression incidents with non-exceptional peers to their differentness in terms of academic strengths. Despite negative consequences of stress, alienation, and labeling, participants seemed content with existing coping skills and strategies. Participants in both Structured Interview groups seemed interested and engaged comfortably in discussions. However, their responses lacked a request or need for additional support, helpful information, or available resources to cope with covert aggression.

Exclusion and hazing

Despite the assertion of “nothing too bad,” an issue of concern surfaced in the short written comments that we explored during the high school Structured Group Interview. Although the most comments indicated an overall sense of safety and support in the gifted resource room, *hazing* of new gifted girls in the resource room occurred. Typically, identification of gifted students occurred at the elementary school level with fewer referrals at the secondary level. However, when gifted students transferred from another school into the gifted resource room, the change required acceptance into an otherwise established group. When gently probed during the Structured Group Interview, the high school girls laughed and indicated difficulty accepting a “ditzzy” new gifted girl. During the group interview, one high school participant stated gifted girls “constantly questioned and second-guessed her,” and that she needed to “prove [herself] to be associated with the gifted girls.”

Limitations and future studies

Gifted adolescent girl participants

We selected gifted adolescent girls for our study based on their gender preference with covert aggression. Ogurlu (2015), however, found gifted adolescent boys also use covert aggression. Moreover, social aggression begins early (Olson 2013), and developmental patterns of covert aggression intensify from kindergarten through 8th grade (Olson et al., 2013). Hurley (2018) reported indirect externalizing behaviors increasing reach downward into lower grades. In addition to small sample size, our study lacked participants from racial, linguistic, and culturally diverse groups. Given these limitations, the primary researcher conducted a similar exploratory study with gifted Hispanic elementary boys and girls after the present study. A larger sample size could increase reliability and generalizability of prevalence findings by topic, grade level, and group and further enhance insight from the subjective experience.

Covert aggression prevalence

Although we found participants intuitively seemed to understand covert aggression terminology, a revised instrument might include an expanded definition of covert aggression (Cross, 2001b). Additional terminology might include “microaggression” and “marginalization,” particularly with high school students. Younger children might view simple illustrations of behaviors to solidify understanding of covert aggression. Although the Reflective Questionnaire only implied bullied and bystander roles to encourage open discussion, future studies could distinguish the bully role as well. Our questionnaire simply tallied observed and experienced incidents to gain a broader sense of prevalence. However, future studies could examine prevalence and subjective experience from the perspective of all three roles. A revised questionnaire could also include facial gestures, body language, gossip, rumors, lying, exclusion, ostracism, hazing, and cyberbullying as viable topics of covert aggression. An improved questionnaire could also eliminate less relevant topics of family and possessions. Short age-appropriate lessons on covert aggression with specific examples taught prior to the study could further ensure full participation.

Subjective experience methodology

Although we triangulated self-reported incidents, literature on bullying, and collective expertise of the three researchers, future studies might include additional perspectives from parents, friends, and general education teachers to further validate findings and increase reliability of self-reported responses. We avoided recorded group sessions to encourage full engagement and ensure confidentiality during Structured Group Interviews. However, individual interviews could yield more in-depth subjective experience responses and ensure privacy on sensitive topics. Zoom video recordings of individual interviews could generate conversation transcripts for conversational analysis. Zoom interview sessions would also permit notation of body language and capture subtleties such as voice volume, nuances of tone, and expressiveness to further understand the subjective experience.

Conclusion

Research literature and anecdotal evidence indicates adolescent girls engage in a more covert or relational form of aggression while adolescent boys tend to use overt and physical aggression. The data collected on prevalence and subjective experience supported both research questions, as we found more prevalence of covert aggression between GG/NG peers than GG/GG classmates. Incidents peaked during 7th grade with fewer incidents in 6th grade, and the fewest during 8th grade. Incidents clustered into an academic ability triad of intelligence, name calling, and grade topics. The remaining five topics formed a cluster of traditional bullying behaviors. The name calling (i.e., “nerd” or “geek”) topic prevailed in the GG/NG group while grades and intelligence topics ranked highest in the GG/GG group. Perspectives from the subjective experience minimized prevalence yet participants indicated they “paid a price.” Gifted adolescent girls relied on intellectual peers to cope with covert aggression experiences. If they shared a covert aggression experience, they did so selectively with trusted persons. Educators, administrators, support personnel, and parents need to monitor grade level transitions when changing schools for potential incidents of covert aggression, particularly hazing practices at the high school level. Simon (2017) suggests covert aggression behaviors carry into adulthood and the workplace with devastating effects. We hope this exploratory study sparks awareness and insight on the reality of covert aggression in schools and its harmful effect on gifted adolescent girls. Peer support groups that recognize covert aggression behaviors and practice intervention strategies could ameliorate its harmful effects and improve the social-emotional wellness of gifted adolescent girls.

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About the Authors

Connie Phelps, Ed.D. directs the Gifted, Talented, and Creative program at Emporia State University. In 2019, she received the inaugural Dr. John E. King Endowed Professor award recognizing impact on students. Prior to her university appointment, she taught middle school gifted students language arts and social sciences; provided consultation services for high school gifted students; and identified elementary gifted students on an itinerate basis in the Wichita Public Schools. She completed doctoral studies in Elementary Education at the University of Arkansas and graduate degrees in Elementary Education at East Texas State University and Gifted Special Education at Emporia State University. She also directs the Great Plains Center for Gifted Studies where she conducts research on creativity, social and emotional issues, gifted girls, and innovative teaching and learning practices. She leads Gifted Program accreditation reviews and serves as a lead site visitor for the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation.

Ashley Beason-Manes, Ph.D. is a performance auditor with the Kansas Division of Legislative Post Audit. She previously taught in public schools for 12 years, during which time she earned her Master's degree in Gifted Education from Emporia State University and her doctorate from the University of Arkansas in Gifted Education and Secondary English education. Her years in the classroom gave her experience with a variety of age groups teaching gifted education, social studies, English language arts, and scholastic journalism. Her research interests include gender in gifted education, creative problem solving, and community activism through gifted programming.

Amy Lockman, MS is a gifted facilitator for USD 233 in Olathe, Kansas. She facilitates gifted pull-out programs in four different elementary schools. She works closely with fellow educators to provide differentiation and enrichment opportunities for gifted students in the regular education classroom. She's actively involved in the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to help identify gifted students and advocate for their specialized needs. Her teaching priorities are addressing the social-emotional needs of the gifted and analyzing standardized district and state scores with respect to gifted identification.

Notes:

Connie Phelps: cphelps@emporia.edu

Ashley Beason-Manes: ashleybeason@gmail.com

Amy Lockman: amlockman@olatheschools.org

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Appendix A

Prevalence of Incidents

Reflective Questionnaire

Date: _____ Age: _____ Grade level: _____ Gender: _____

Covert aggression occurs when individuals manipulate relationships as an attempt to control power among peers. Specific behaviors may include talking behind someone's back, spreading rumors or gossip, pretended friendship, etc. This study explores the covert aggression experiences of gifted adolescent girls with intellectual and age peers.

1. Please place a tally mark indicating the frequency of specific covert aggressive behaviors related to the suggested topics listed which you experienced or observed between gifted girls and other gifted girls in the respective grade level.

TOPICS	Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
	Observed	Experienced	Observed	Experienced	Observed	Experienced
Grades						
Intelligence						
Name Calling						
Personal Appearance						
Family						
Social Status						
Possessions						
Other (specify)						

2. Please place a tally mark indicating the frequency of specific covert aggressive behaviors related to the suggested topics listed which you experienced or observed between gifted girls and their non-exceptional age girl peers in the respective grade level.

TOPICS	Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
	Observed	Experienced	Observed	Experienced	Observed	Experienced
Grades						
Intelligence						
Name Calling						
Personal Appearance						
Family						
Social Status						
Possessions						
Other (specify)						

PLEASE CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE

3. What was the worst instance of covert aggression you experienced or observed between gifted girls and their intellectual or non-exceptional girls age peers in grades six through eight?

4. What, if anything, was the effect of that experience on your life?

5. Did you tell anyone about the instance? ____ Yes ____ No If yes, what was the response?

6. What patterns or trends, if any, did you experienced or observed differences between gifted girls and other gifted girls in grades six through eight?

7. What patterns or trends, if any, did you experienced or observed differences between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers in grades six through eight?

8. What similarities, if any, do you see in the covert aggression instances between gifted girls and other gifted girls and between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers?

9. What differences, if any, do you see in the covert aggression instances between gifted girls and other gifted girls and between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers in grades six through eight?

10. What further comments might you make these experiences or observations?

Appendix B

Reflective Questionnaire

Grade 7

I haven't seen anything really bad, but I've seen people talking about people behind their backs. I only talked about it with my mom, just casually at home. She helped me to think about what I would do in that situation. It made me glad that I have good friends who don't do that to me.

I just notice the normal stuff like people talking about other people. I've talked to my friends about it but didn't really report it.

I feel awkward when I go to the [gifted] room from the cafeteria during lunch because you walk in front of everyone with your tray. They ask you where you're going or look at you weird. They automatically think you're in ISS or in trouble or something if you have to leave the lunchroom. My friends and I joke that I'm on my way to ISS each time I go for gifted.

Grade 8

I haven't seen anything really bad.

I haven't noticed anything, really. Haven't told anyone.

There wasn't anything really bad that I noticed.

There was a special dress-up day (spirit day) where not a lot of people dressed up, but some did. It was Nerd Day. The popular girls said, "Why'd all the nerds dress up for Nerd Day?"

I've been called a nerd before, and it wasn't meant nicely. Now that the new cafeteria has the kitchen in the back, you have to walk in front of everyone to leave and go to gifted. Before, the kitchen was outside the cafeteria so no one really noticed if you left ... they couldn't see you leave. It's sort of embarrassing. We talk about it a lot.

Nothing too bad. It's not a huge deal, but it does feel weird when we go to the [gifted resource] room. Sometimes people ask you where you're going and you tell them, but then it's not such a big deal. Sometimes it's a little embarrassing.

I didn't really see anything that bad. I came from a different school, and it wasn't that bad there either.

My friends and I aren't cool, and some popular girls called us retards. I didn't hear it, but my friend said she did. They don't realize how much it hurts people's feelings. Didn't really tell anyone, just talked about it with my friends.

Grade 9

I've experienced name calling because of being gifted. I felt embarrassed and tried to hide my intelligence.

Grade 10

I learned not to push the gifted things onto people and to not identify myself as gifted. Others may have known, but I would only tell if asked.

We [gifted girls] understand that other kids have talents in other areas.

I have breakdowns when I don't perform as well as some other students.

If you do badly on schoolwork with gifted girls, they empathize with feelings of failure because they've been there before too.

Grade 11

Some gifted kids ganged up on another gifted girl calling her names in French that she didn't understand. It made me feel guilty for not telling her what was going on.

New gifted kids to the program were hazed if they were too weird ... or ditz. Regular kids were instantly liked.

Grade 12

Aggression between gifted girls is usually a challenge over who is smarter. Gifted and non-exceptional girls, the aggression is over more personal or material things.

The gifted boys and girls were always recognized as the "smart kids," and we all stuck together.

My gifted friends were always around to help me with any problem.

Non-gifted girls seem to experience more drama.

Other non-exceptional girls would always compare their grades to ours. If someone got a higher score than you on a test or worksheet, they would brag about it.

A few kids were jealous and accuse us of getting to do special stuff and extra activities. I kind of felt like being gifted was a privilege.

Appendix C

Structured Group Interview

Middle School Grades Seven and Eight

1. What was the worst instance of covert aggression between GG/GG or between GG/NG?

The worst covert aggression happens because girls think that being in gifted makes you geeky or nerdy. They also do covert aggression a lot when it has to do with guys. Once people get to know me, they don't think I'm nerdy. I stay away from the drama over guys so it doesn't really affect me. There aren't really problems between the gifted girls, but if there are, it's because they hang out with different groups outside of gifted. Sometimes people act timid towards you when you come from or go to the gifted room, like you're different. Girls hang with girls with the same interests. Girls might avoid other girls, but there are no fights or anything. Covert aggression is less in gifted girls and gifted girls probably because they know they have at least one thing in common. The relationship between gifted girls and non-exceptional girls changes from elementary to middle school – it seems more distant.

Saying mean things and spreading rumors happens. People just think different than you think. Gifted girls all get along because we're all on the same intellectual base. Usually if someone doesn't like someone outside of gifted or because that person did something, but that rarely happens. Girls in lower social rank or that appear different usually get picked on in the non-exceptional category. The occasional "popular" kid has a rumor about them, too. All girls hear things, but girls from both parties may not spread them. With a smaller group like gifted, you have less feuds because you aren't mixed with kids you dislike. With all peers, you find people you like and dislike. I've never been made fun of for being smart. Actually, people and teachers depend, trust, and look up to you more.

Sometimes teased about my facial appearance. I asked my friends how to clean (for acne) my face better. I haven't noticed as much making fun in the seventh grade. There is more covert aggression between gifted girls and non-exceptional girls. People make much more fun of your intelligence than much else no matter who or where you are.

I have never experienced or observed any specific bad covert aggression. Most of the gifted girls tend to stay together, except for a few who are considered popular. Some of the non-gifted girls don't like that we get to leave [school] sometimes. The gifted girls sometimes like to brag, but when they're with other gifted girls, they're quieter.

I saw one girl was getting called names pretty badly behind her back by her "friends." I then decided that I would never do that. A lot of girls do that at this age, and you can't control it. Other girls would pick on each other for no reason based on if they liked them. In both [gifted and non-exceptional], girls still get picked on for their looks and status. But gifted girls don't pick on anyone based on grades or how smart they are. With non-gifted girls, the bullying is much stronger.

Haven't really experienced or observed a lot of covert aggression. Gifted girls never really picked on each other. In seventh and eighth grade, they tease you about being smart, but not really in sixth grade.

A lot of exclusion and general unfriendliness. This happened especially the second semester of seventh grade. The first time I saw it happen, I was shocked. Gifted girls tend to want to hang out with other gifted girls. The ones who dress nicely with the trends tend to be higher in social status than with non-gifted girls that dress similarly. It all comes down to popularity, though there's not a spoken word about who is and who isn't. This is both in gifted and non-gifted. Gifted girls are better at not showing their aggression obviously. It's harder to spot than with non-exceptional girls. Gifted girls don't use Facebook to post aggression, mostly texting. Gifted girls are more comfortable with other gifted girls.

My biggest thing is probably walking through the lunchroom when everyone is staring at you. It is just really awkward and embarrassing, and it makes you feel nerdy. Me and my gifted friends talk about it all the time; it's just one of those what can you do. It wasn't a big deal in sixth grade, but in middle school it is considered nerdy to be in gifted. In gifted, we are all friends. Deep down you're still dealing with the core issues of popularity and status, and that's what leads to aggression in both instances. Among your gifted friends, it isn't a big deal to be gifted, but it is sort of uncool to be gifted in middle school. Sometimes it's like two different worlds. Overall it's a great experience.

When someone asks where you're going or what you're doing, and you [say] "Oh, it's a gifted thing," it makes you feel awkward. Most of the gifted girls are all friendly with each other. Everyone can be a little judgmental and judge each other. A lot of the girls in gifted are friendly to each other but it varies a lot when

you're with the rest of the girls in our school. A lot of the girls in gifted are really nice and aren't mean to each other, but it's different when it's with everyone because you can't like everyone in the school.

2. What, if anything, was the effect of that experience on your life?

The pressure brought on by grades creates more competition. It might not be a giant competition with other people, but it's a race with yourself. When grades or achievements are publicized, girls compare themselves to others who don't get the recognition or who didn't achieve. Gifted girls are kinder to the non-exceptional girls.

Some of the popular girls call me a retard behind my back. I really couldn't care less what they think of me. I told my friends, and they reacted the way I did. I know one girl who will give me a weird look, but that's all. I'm "not cool," so I get picked on more than some other girls. We all get picked on, no matter what. I think all girls pick on each other a lot. The mean girls need to know what they're doing hurts people.

3. What patterns or trends, if any, did you experience between GG/GG or between GG/NG?

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The gifted boys and girls were always recognized as the "smart kids," and we all stuck together.

High School Grades 9-12

1. What was the worst instance of covert aggression between GG/GG or between GG/NG?

Kids always thought we got to do special things in [gifted] like take field trips and get out of the class. They would say we were privileged. They didn't understand purpose of gifted program.

They thought it was unfair that we got to do special things.

"Is bullying the same as covert aggression?" Girls are supposed to be nice and not get physical so girls are sneakier.

Since I wouldn't let anyone cheat off me, I was called stuck up.

I was called the teacher's favorite. Girls would tell me you don't even work hard and the teacher gives you good grades just because she likes you. I told them I work hard for my grades.

I hated working in groups and doing all the work just to get a decent grade. Kids would act like they wanted me in their group, but they just wanted me to do all the work.

No one would talk to me for weeks when I moved here. I didn't know anyone and the only thing they knew about me was that I was going to gifted classroom. They thought I was a smarty-pants and stuck up.

2. What, if anything, was the effect of that experience on your life?

When I was in seventh grade, I remember I used to get in trouble a lot. I was not the perfect student ... gifted girls starting asking me if I really belonged in here. I undermined myself and never thought I was really good enough. I still don't.

[The girls were reminded this was a safe place to talk and asked to self-reflect.]

Gifted girls do participate in bullying. Looking back they feel bad.

3. What, if anything, was the effect of that experience on your life?

We are all very competitive. Usually it's a positive competition, mostly good and supportive ... but it's difficult to be new in here (gifted class).

[When asked about hazing, all the girls laugh.]

We were a group and we didn't always include new kids in gifted class. This one girl was just ditz. We liked things the way they were.

We didn't appreciate new kids either ... interacting is hard.

When I came here, even the gifted kids constantly questioned and second guessed me. I hang out with different groups that have strong personalities. I had to prove myself to be associated with the gifted.

Most [boys] like smart [girls] since we can handle things. Some [boys] are intimidated though.