ABSTRACT

Specific teacher skills for effective prevention of student aggressive behavior and effective intervention when such behavior occurs remain largely undefined. The purpose of this case study is to describe the strategies used by school teachers identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom. The research questions are: how do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?, how do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?, how do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior does happen?, and in their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?

Two middle school teachers, who were identified by three independent professionals as “very good” at preventing and managing aggressive behavior, were observed for entire school days for a total of 14 observations each over a period of 2½ months. An in-depth semi-structured initial interview and 14 informal interviews were conducted during this same period of time. A majority of students at the school were low socio-economic and minority. Data analyses began with the initial interview and continued as data collection continued.
The teachers differed in teaching style and personality, but both were very effective at preventing student aggressive behavior and used similar strategies. A positive classroom climate was the strongest indicator for the prevention of aggression. Eight strategies used by the teachers to create a positive classroom climate are described. These eight strategies are the use of positive classroom management methods, challenging students academically and having high academic expectations of students, high expectations for student behavior, trust of students, allowing students to meet needs in the classroom, providing supplies, respect of students, and not tolerating student disrespect. The teachers also used culturally relevant teaching strategies to prevent aggressive behavior. When aggressive behaviors did happen, intervention was swift and solution-focused. Finally, the teachers believed that the strategies they used can be learned by other teachers. Limitations and recommendations for further study are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Extraordinary teacher, Effective teacher, Aggressive behavior, Teacher training, Cultural diversity, Classroom management, Classroom climate, Positive discipline, Respect of students.
PREVENTING AGGRESSION IN THE CLASSROOM:
A CASE STUDY OF EXTRAORDINARY TEACHERS

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The incidence of most forms of violence in the schools has been decreasing nationally since 1994, yet incidents of aggression and other forms of violence at school remain unacceptably high and students still describe fear of violence during school (Kann et al., 2000). Schools are interested in preventing aggressive behavior not only because it is unacceptable, but also because aggression interferes with learning (Kaufman et al., 2001). It is important to intervene early in childhood before behavior is less changeable. Schools are also in the difficult position of being legally accountable for the behavior of the students entrusted to them. Thus, for some educators, it has been the fear of liability that has led to identifying violence as a problem in school (Kingery et al., 1998).

Although school-based violence prevention programs show promise, a large number of violence prevention programs for youth remain unevaluated. Therefore, relatively little is known about the effectiveness of many of the programs currently in use in schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In programs found effective, it remains unclear which components are most effective and whether effectiveness is transferable to different ages, settings, instructors, cultures, and group sizes (Thornton et al., 2000). Most importantly and related to this study, to separate the effect of teacher training from the effect of other intervention components is difficult. Positive results of prevention programs may be due to the teacher training done in conjunction with the implementation of violence prevention curricula (Gottfredson et al., 1998).
Teacher training may or may not address the relation between teacher behavior and violence prevention, although the teacher-student relationship is important in the prevention of behavior problems at school, including aggressiveness and other violent behavior (Babad, 1993). Pre-service training of teachers often does not include training in classroom behavior management or the use of effective, respectful and consistent discipline methods (Flaherty, 2000).

Due to growing concern for the social and emotional ramifications of aggression for children and adolescent victims, as well as the need to prepare students for participation in society, the role of teachers has already widened. Teachers are now required to take on an increased responsibility for promoting their students’ social, moral and emotional growth. At the same time, many teachers feel they are not well prepared to take on this added role (Adalbjarnardottir & Selman, 1997). Teachers are responsible for most of the prevention and intervention of aggression that occurs in schools. The knowledge and skills teachers need to prevent aggression at school while helping students develop into caring responsible adults remain largely unidentified. As a consequence, teachers are often left to learn how to prevent aggression on the job. More information is needed about what actually works for teachers in the classroom to prevent aggressive behavior from occurring and intervening when it does happen. The goal of this study was to identify the strategies used by teachers who have extraordinary skill at preventing aggressive behavior at school.

**Significance of the problem**

The harm of violent student behavior to both victim and aggressor is well documented (see Thornton et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In 1999 students aged 12-18 years were victim to some 2.5 million acts of violence at school (this figure
includes damage to student property) including approximately 186,000 incidents of serious violence such as rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. Between July 1, 1998 and June 30, 1999 there were 38 homicides at school, of which 33 victims were students (Kaufman et al., 2001). Many more children are victims of bullying and other aggressive behavior. Almost all boys experience bullying before they finish school, either as a victim or as an observer (Horne et al., 1994). In a national study of a representative sample of students in grades 6 through 10 (n=15,686), almost 30% reported moderate (“sometimes”) or frequent (once a week or more) involvement in bullying, either as bully, victim, or both (Nansel et al., 2001).

Student concern about aggression and other forms of violence at school, and on the way to and from school, has a detrimental effect on the school environment and likely on learning (Kaufman et al., 2001). Many children report fearing aggression from other students at school, particularly if they have already been victimized (Kaufman et al., 2001; Bastian & Taylor, 1991). Victims and observers of aggressive behavior may become anxious or hyper-vigilant and students who fear aggression report avoiding areas of the school they feel are unsafe (Kaufman et al., 2001). In 1999, almost 13% of White and Hispanic students and 17% of Black students aged 12 to 18 years reported someone at school calling them a derogatory name (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Hate related language (and graffiti) increase student feelings of vulnerability. Many students hesitate to ask for help from teachers or other school staff for fear of reprisals or inadequate protection (Newman et al., 1999).

When schools do intervene, violent students are likely to be punished; the increasing adoption of zero-tolerance policies by schools is a contributing factor. The punishment most commonly reported is suspension or expulsion (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999), which does not solve the problem but serves to move it to the community. Students who are not
at school do not learn how to modify their behavior, and they also get behind in their schoolwork. Aggressive behavior in students, including bullying, is a stable indicator of later juvenile and adult criminal convictions (Olweus, 1993; Loeber, 1990; Huesmann et al., 1984).

Significantly, victims of aggressive behavior and other violence at school are more likely than non-victims to have committed acts of violence themselves. Victims are more likely than non-victims to have carried a weapon to school (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999). Victims who are also bullies have been found to suffer from low levels of self-esteem (O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Also, both bullies and victims of bullying are more likely than other students to engage in physical fights, be hurt in a physical fight, and to carry weapons both outside and in school (Nansel et al., 2003).

Effective teacher intervention skills for preventing aggressive behavior remain largely undefined. Recommendations for teacher actions to prevent aggressive behavior do exist (for example, see Hazler, 1996), but these recommendations frequently are not based on studies of the effectiveness of such action. One of the recommended interventions is to increase awareness of the problem (Orpinas & Horne, in press). Many teachers do not recognize verbal aggression and bullying (O’Moore, 2000). Unfortunately, when teachers do intervene, students often perceive teacher intervention as having limited effect (Glover et al., 2000). Some school-based interventions, particularly those that group high-risk students together, may have harmful effect (Dishion et al., 1999).

Yet, some extraordinary teachers do prevent aggressive behavior in their classrooms. Students report that teachers who are tough and caring are those who maintain order (Furlong et al., 1994). Little is known about what strategies are used by these extraordinary teachers,
however. If the methods used by these teachers are described, perhaps they can be better understood.

**Purpose statement**

The purpose of this case study is to describe the strategies used by school teachers who are identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom. Extraordinary teachers are those who are able to prevent aggressive behavior in the classroom, recognize when intervention between students is needed, and intervene in a meaningful and helpful way.

The research questions are:

1. How do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?
2. How do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?
3. How do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior does happen?
4. In their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I define violence, aggression, and bullying, as well as cultural diversity. Following, I describe the problem of aggressive behavior and other forms of youth violence and the problem of violence at school, and I describe some strategies schools are using to prevent school-based violence. The role of teachers in school-based violence prevention is discussed. Issues of diversity and teacher preparation and their relation to violence prevention are also addressed. Knowledge-to-date characteristics of extraordinary teachers, that is teachers who prevent aggressive behavior in their classrooms, are described.

Definitions

In this section, I define terms related to both violence prevention and cultural diversity education as I use them in this paper.

Violence is often defined as behavior intended to cause physical harm to another person, although many researchers include behaviors that cause emotional harm, as the issue of bullying receives more attention (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Violence is usually considered a problem at school in connection with less serious behavior such as aggressiveness or anti-social behavior, although serious violence sometimes is a problem in schools.

Serious violence includes the crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) and may also include sexual assault (Kaufman et al., 2001).
Aggression is a disposition to dominate without considering others’ rights. Aggressive behaviors are intended to hurt another person, either physically or emotionally (Orpinas & Horne, in press). Aggressive behavior among students commonly includes pushing, grabbing, slapping, and stealing (Price & Everett, 1997). Aggression that has been demonstrated to be stable over time includes bullying behavior (Glover et al., 2000; Salmivalli et al., 1998; Olweus, 1978).

Bullying is defined as negative action against someone (the victim) in which someone (the bully) intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort repeatedly and over time on a victim (Olweus, 1994). Bullying takes place in relationships in which there is an imbalance of power (Horne & Socherman, 1996) but it is not bullying when students of about equal power argue or fight (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying may include teasing, badgering, exclusion, or direct physical bullying such as pushing, hitting, and kicking (Nansel et al., 2001). In its widest interpretation, bullying may be interpreted as an invasion of another’s personal space (Glover et al., 2000). Bullying is a problem in schools not just because it may lead to more aggressive or violent behavior, but also because it may interfere with the learning of the victim (Horne & Socherman, 1996). Bullying is commonly given as a reason for missing school by the victim (Eslea & Smith, 1998).

Discipline often means control. Classroom discipline is usually considered the response to lack of student self-discipline, misbehavior, or to classroom disruption and is often equated with punishment (Clark, 1998). However, the Latin word *disciplina(ae)* means teaching or learning. Discipline by teachers does not have to be punitive. The term discipline is largely ignored in the violence and aggression literature, although the definition of discipline as a
response to classroom disruption includes the constructs targeted by most violence prevention interventions.

School or classroom climate is defined as the atmosphere or “readily perceptible personality” within a school or classroom that is created by the combination of characteristics organizing it (Vessels, 1998, p. 171.). School climate, including individual classroom climate, is increasingly recognized as a relevant component of violence prevention in schools. A classroom climate that fosters acceptance of differences among children, or more importantly, that fosters celebration of differences, and does not tolerate aggressive behavior may be protective against aggressive behavior.

Cultural diversity traditionally is seen as the differences found in our society such as race, culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs, economic status, language and accent, gender, immigration status, disability, and sexual orientation. Differences may be directly observable such as language and dialect, communication style, customs, dance, music, and child-rearing practices, or differences may be less observable such as attitudes and values (Thornton et al., 2000). Culture has more recently been described as shared or common experiences that allow multiple identifications in relation to changing and social or political contexts. Culture defined in this way is dynamic and complex (Banks, 2001) and sometimes contains contradictory elements. The term culture often is used to emphasize difference, but this definition emphasizes similarity over difference in many dimensions of identification. The concept of multicultural education is frequently used to describe diversity in education (Banks, 2001; Banks, 1994a).
School violence

Epidemiology of school violence, aggression, and bullying

Adolescent violence in the United States has been dropping since 1993, and the homicide rate among youth aged 4-17 years is the lowest since 1988 (Commission for the Prevention of Youth Violence, 2000). Despite this decline, homicide is still responsible for 18% of deaths among youth aged 10-24 years (Kann et al., 2000) and is the leading cause of death for African-Americans aged 15 to 24 years (Anderson, 2001). Nationally, violence in the schools has also declined in recent years. However, the perception that violence is a growing problem in the schools seems to be increasing, perhaps due to increasing multiple victim events such as the incident at Columbine High School in early 1999. Violence among students remains a public health priority, and the Surgeon General has responded with a report on youth violence (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The prevalence of students threatened or injured with a weapon on school property has remained largely constant in the period between 1993 and 1999 (Kaufman et al., 2001). Weapon use is associated with an increase of both homicide and intentional injury, and almost one-fifth (17.4%) of middle and high school-aged students nationwide reported carrying some sort of weapon in the last 30 days. Nationally, 6.4% of students reported carrying a weapon on school property in the last 30 days, and 8.9% of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Grunbaum et al., 2002). Nationwide, 5.7% of students reported carrying a gun, although not necessarily on school property, in the last 30 days (Grunbaum et al., 2002). Weapon carrying on school grounds is perhaps the most feared form of aggressive behavior of students, although less violent forms of aggressive behavior are more prevalent and therefore more problematic for schools on a day-to-day basis.
A consistent relationship between bullying and more serious violent behaviors has been found (Nansel et al., 2003). Estimates of the prevalence of bullying vary by study, often due to how surveys are worded, to differing time frame, and to behaviors included (see Orpinas and Horne, in press) but a large study coordinated by the World Health Organization found that among students in grades six to ten in the United States, 29.9% of the students reported involvement in bullying either moderately or frequently either as bully, as victim, or as both (Nansel et al., 2001).

Poor self-esteem has consistently been found in children who are victims of bullying, but the relation between student self-esteem and violence is controversial (see Olweus, 1993). Low self-esteem has been linked to aggressive and bullying behavior in some cases (O’Moore, 2000) and in other cases high self-esteem (and threats to high self-esteem) has been linked to violent behavior (Baumeister et al., 1996).

Violent, aggressive and bullying behavior affects feeling of safety at school for both students and teachers. The number of students who report they do not feel safe at school has decreased in the past few years, although 5% of students aged 12 through 18 years report avoiding one or more places at school for their own safety (Kaufman et al., 2001). Nationwide, 6.6% of students had missed one or more days of school due to feeling unsafe at school, or traveling to or from school, in the last 30 days (Grunbaum et al., 2002). Four of 10 public school teachers (41%) and 6 of 10 public school students (63%) report that the problem of violence is a factor in students leaving their school (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999). One study (n=4500) found 11% of students wishing to change schools due to feeling unsafe at school (Glover et al., 2000).
School-based violence prevention

A goal of schools is the prevention of school aggression and violence, yet it remains unclear how to best approach violence prevention in the schools. Schools often address violence issues in a piecemeal, rather than comprehensive fashion due to time and resource constraints (Petersen et al., 1998). Many schools have implemented physical changes such as metal detectors and cameras as well as uniformed police officers on the school campus. Schools also have used zero-tolerance policies and dress codes in the attempt to reduce violence (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999). Conflict management classes, programs for at-risk students, implementation of violence prevention curricula, and school climate changes have also been tried. Teachers whose schools are ranked as providing only fair or poor quality of education and teachers whose schools have a high proportion of students of lower socio-economic status are much more likely than other teachers to believe the steps taken by their school to control violence are inadequate (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999).

Violence prevention researchers have increasingly focused on theories of social cognition to explain children’s aggression (Dodge, 1980; Kelder et al, 1996; Perry et al, 1990). Violence-prevention curricula based on social cognitive approaches integrate teacher-directed social skills training with peer-focused strategies for promoting moral reasoning. The focus is on teaching children how to think. Although curricula differ in the cognitive skills or processes that are emphasized, all recognize that cognition, behavior, and affect are interrelated. Such approaches are increasingly seen as part of a multiple component approach to school discipline problems (Larson, 1994). Cognitively based violence prevention interventions used as a response to discipline problems are popular due to their theoretical appeal, but the effectiveness of such interventions at reducing problem behavior is currently largely limited to short-term
improvements in behavior (Stage & Quiroz, 1997). The strength of a social cognitive model in the prevention of aggression still needs to be established.

Comprehensive intervention programs are recommended but are challenging to evaluate due to the difficulty in determining which element of the intervention is responsible for any observed attitude or behavior change. Evaluation is time consuming and requires that people are available to conduct the assessment. Outcome evaluations of comprehensive school-based programs often have methodological flaws including lack of placebo control group, samples that are not representative, limited follow-up (or none), and unreliable assessment instruments (Hudley et al., 1998).

Effectiveness of school-based interventions remains unclear. Decreased negative behavior effects lasting six months following a 30-lesson curriculum intervention have been found (Grossman et al., 1997), but only on one measure. Farrell & Meyer (1997) found positive effect, but only on certain measures and with a small practical effect. Orpinas et al. (2000) found no intervention effects, and others (Dishion et al., 1999) have found a negative effect. It is important to remember that in school-based violence prevention, as in other educational disciplines, lack of long-term outcome data does not automatically imply lack of effect, but generally reflects the newness of the intervention and the need to continue to search for what works or the best instruments to measure change.

Studies of intervention effectiveness that are rigorously evaluated are beginning to be undertaken (see State Injury Profiles, 2001), and promising strategies for reducing youth violence do exist (Thornton et al, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). However, human resources are needed to maintain comprehensive school health efforts. Leadership is essential to this maintenance (Gottfredson et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1993; Orpinas
Many comprehensive programs are discontinued after implementation has begun (Weiler & Dorman, 1995). Teacher morale, mastery, and resources are also needed for prevention efforts to be successful.

Because comprehensive interventions require more energy and resources than many schools have to implement them, attempts to evaluate the components of comprehensive programs are being made. School climate has been theorized to be an important component for comprehensive interventions as implementation of curricula alone has met with little success (Gottfredson, 1997). Studies indicate community service activities do not seem to work in improving health outcomes in school-based health promotion interventions (Dishion et al., 1999; Gottfredson, 1997). Teacher training is believed to be critical to successful implementation. Positive results of prevention programs may be entirely due to the teacher training done in conjunction with the implementation of violence prevention curricula (Gottfredson et al., 1998).

Intervention in the classroom has several advantages. First, it is an opportunity to reach children identified as at risk without having to separate them from other children (Yoshikawa, 1994). Interventions including all children avoid the risk of stigma associated with labeling some of the children as aggressive. Longitudinal studies have found that grouping aggressive children with aggressive or deviant peers has an iatrogenic effect; deviancy seems to be reinforced when children are grouped in this manner (Dishion & Andrews, 1995; Dishion et al., 1997; Dishion et al., 1999; McCord, 1999). Second, aggressive behavior that begins in early childhood has shown considerable stability into adolescence and adulthood (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Kellam et al., 1994; Loeber, 1990). Aggressive behavior is sometimes demonstrated quite early. One-third of elementary-aged students already indicated they would hit back in response to physical aggression (Price et al., 2002). Third, it is difficult to stop antisocial behavior once
such behavior becomes serious (Loeber, 1990) or diverse (Yoshikawa, 1994). Studies show that aggressive behavior that appears by early adolescence is most likely to lead to becoming a chronic offender (Cohen & Wilson-Brewer, 1991; Loeber, 1990; Patterson et al., 1989), although a substantial proportion of aggressive youth do not become aggressive adults (Loeber & Hay, 1997). Violent youth usually begin with minor forms of antisocial behavior that increase in frequency and severity. This provides opportunity for intervention before antisocial behavior becomes more serious. Violent behavior does not usually begin with a serious violent offense (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

**School risk factors for aggressive behavior**

Factors within schools that have been associated with aggressive behavior of students include a lack of clarity of rules, weak or inconsistent staff support by administration, and few or no allowances made for individual differences among students (Mayer, 1995). These factors appear to contribute to events that may trigger aggressive behavior. Additionally, when aggressive behavior, including bullying, is not controlled by schools, an atmosphere is created that may encourage (or reward) violent behavior (O’Moore, 2000).

Teachers may unwittingly contribute to aggressive behavior and bullying. Some teachers express negative attitudes toward bullies and sympathy toward victims (Boulton, 1997), and it is not uncommon for teachers to blame victims and express frustration that victims cannot work out their own problems (O’Moore, 2000). Teachers do not always recognize aggressive behavior, particularly behavior associated with relational aggression such as exclusion from a group (Boultin, 1997).

Low school involvement, or low school connectedness, has been identified as a school factor related to aggressive behavior (Mayer, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997). School connectedness
includes a sense that teachers care for students and have high expectations for student performance. Lack of school connectedness has been found to be a significant predictor of student emotional distress (Resnick et al., 1997). Researchers have demonstrated a strong association between student attitudes towards school and towards themselves as learners on the one hand, and achievement motivation and academic success on the other (Covington, 1984; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Weinstein, 1984, 1991). Social competence is also related to academic achievement, and vice versa (Welsh et al., 2001). School engagement may be protective against both risk of violence and academic failure. Ironically, the implementation of zero-tolerance policies by a growing number of schools in the attempt to reduce violence does little to foster a supportive climate for safe reporting. Zero-tolerance policies are likely to be viewed contemptuously by students due to the unreasonable responses that result from them; students are unlikely to report other students if the punishments which result are seen as disproportionate (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

**Discipline as a violence issue**

Aggressive behavior at school not only affects the lives of students, but also takes up the teacher’s time and disrupts the teaching and learning process. Measures of student aggression and disruptiveness have been highly correlated with each other (Welsh et al., 2001). Frequent classroom discipline problems in the schools include talking and getting up without permission, disrespect of adults, teasing, name-calling, and bullying (Bear, 1998). The discipline problems of bullying, teasing, name-calling, and fighting, as well as more serious discipline problems like weapon carrying and delinquency, are often problems targeted by violence prevention interventions in the school. Recently more serious problems such as drug abuse, fighting, and gang membership have been defined as discipline problems (Bear, 1998).
Schools and school systems have traditionally handled discipline problems by putting in place a structure of rules and consequences with increasingly more serious punishments including suspension and expulsion. Prior to leaving school, students who drop out often experience disciplinary suspensions (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996). Chronic discipline problems at school, along with associating with violent peers at school, puts a student at risk for developing violent behavior (Dahlberg, 1998).

Most school discipline programs emphasize rewards and punishments from teachers’ to control and manage student behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). The most common general classroom approaches to discipline of hostile, aggressive, and defiant students are to control and suppress undesirable behavior (Brophy & McCaslin, 1992). Controlling strategies such as telling, threatening, and punishing are easy to use and are effective in the short-term. However, compliance often is a result of fear or is “grudging compliance” (Bear, 1998). Discipline is the primary means of perpetuation of teacher power and authority (Noguera, 1995). Teachers seldom use positive approaches to discipline (Brophy & McCaslin, 1992) although use of strategies such as praise, modeling, and social problem solving are recommended. Often teachers influence students’ feelings of insubordination with the discipline methods they choose to use in the classroom.

It has been recommended that schools create more humane learning environments as a way to counter violence in the schools (Noguera, 1995). These environments should change social relationships in schools in a way that students feel less alienated, threatened and repressed. Cultural differences among students and between students and teachers should be examined. Like discipline, violence in school is often equated with insubordination and the problem of maintaining order.
Role of teachers in reducing aggression

Prevention and intervention

Teachers are responsible for a majority of the prevention of aggression in schools, as well as intervention when aggressive behaviors do occur. It is up to teachers to prevent unwanted behavior from their own students, to intervene effectively when problems between students arise, and to develop a classroom climate conducive to peaceful learning. Teachers can influence the beliefs and behavior of children (Thornton et al., 2000). Additionally, when schools implement violence prevention interventions classroom teachers often conduct the curriculum.

Current texts designed for practicing teachers that address classroom management and discipline in the schools now include chapters on classroom and school climate (Newman, Horne & Bartolomucci, 2000; Jones & Jones, 1998; Nelson et al., 1997) and emphasize culturally responsive teaching (Hollins & Oliver, 1999). Teachers are encouraged to create a supportive learning climate, to treat children as individuals, and to practice a variety of teaching strategies, including collaboration, to increase student success in the classroom and to minimize classroom disruption. Punitive actions are generally discouraged. These actions, including disapproving comments by teachers, have been shown to promote aggressive behavior (Ishii-Jordan, 2000; Mayer, 1995).

When teachers intervene to stop aggression, it is unknown if strategies that administrators and teachers consider to be an effective intervention are deemed effective by students. Only about half of students perceive that teacher intervention brings any improvement to bullying situations (Glover et al., 2000). It is possible that the intervention may increase bullying and other kinds of aggressive behavior, making the situation worse for the victim.
Recognition of situations that require teacher intervention and knowledge of how to intervene effectively are skills that can be learned, but the skills to learn must first be known. It is not clear what actions by teachers are most effective at diffusing aggressive behavior. Teachers largely intervene by punishing the aggressor who is caught, which might worsen student relationships over the long term. Whole-school anti-bullying policies have been recommended (Glover et al., 2000; Olweus, 1994), but effectiveness of whole-school climate change is still being evaluated. It also remains unclear how anti-bullying policies should be implemented to increase their effectiveness.

**Classroom climate**

Teachers are responsible for the climate of their classrooms. Peaceful and nurturing classroom climates are those where positive relationships among students are expected and nurtured and, therefore aggression is not tolerated. Climate change that encourages the peaceful solution of conflicts, the identification of aggressive behavior including bullying, and that allows for the acceptance of reporting of aggressive behavior by students, is often needed. Increasing student reporting of aggressive behavior is often difficult when the culture of schools promotes not “telling” on other children, and students do not understand the difference between tattling and reporting (Eslea & Smith, 1998). Students will not give information about other students or report threats unless they feel they are safe and that a reasonable response will be made as a result of reporting (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Climate of the classroom is dependent on perceptions. Teachers perceive the adjustment of children, and these perceptions may differ from children’s actual adjustment (Witcher, 1993).

Racial and ethnic differences among students and teachers will result in varying priorities of the dimensions of school climate; children’s background influences their definition of positive
school climate. For example, African-American students have been found to value nurturing teachers while Hispanic children (the majority studied were Mexican American) have been found to be more sensitive to the total school environment including peers and classroom setting (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996). However, assumptions based on stereotypes of students’ identification with particular cultures must be avoided. Cultural groups are not monolithic, and individuals will differ in their cultural identification.

Often teachers influence students’ feelings of insubordination with the discipline methods they choose to use in the classroom. Teachers who have not examined their disciplining practices tend to be significantly more punitive without explaining punishment and more focused on punishing than solving the conflict. These teachers also are much less likely to praise students (Alexander & Curtis, 1995). Teachers’ selection of behavioral intervention is influenced by the type of student behavior (more punitive when behavior interferes with the teacher), by the teacher’s beliefs and background (more punitive if teacher feels unprepared to handle the behavior), and by student background (punishment varies by student socio-economic status and race) (Ishii-Jordan, 2000). Mistreatment of students has the potential to lead to increased student hostility, but little research has been conducted investigating the relationship between student treatment at school by teachers and administrators and resulting aggressive behavior. Teachers expressing negative affect about a child do have increased negative interactions with the child (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). Most students witness or experience verbal mistreatment by teachers (Hyman & Weiler, 1994), and minorities and those with low socio-economic status are at greater risk of such mistreatment (Hyman & Perone, 1998). Teachers and administrators need to “take responsibility for securing the rights of the children in
the school” (Astor, 1995, p. 108). It remains unclear, however, if classroom climate that is culturally responsive to students is an effective method to reduce aggression among students.

Teacher preparation

Teacher training in conjunction with comprehensive violence prevention interventions has primarily focused on implementation of a curriculum, although recently programs specific to training, like the GREAT Teacher Program (Orpinas, Horne & MVPP, 2004), are being developed and implemented. Few studies have included differences in training in the evaluation of effectiveness of violence prevention interventions. However, several studies have examined the effect of teacher training on implementation of comprehensive school health education curricula. Even when teachers are similarly trained, there are wide differences in the fidelity of implementation in the classroom (Aber et al., 1998). Including teachers in the planning of the intervention may increase acceptance of training for teachers who are not enthusiastic about the intervention; teacher enthusiasm is associated with increased implementation of curricula (Rohrbach et al., 1993). Administrative support is also essential to success of training (Dusenbury et al, 1997; Hausman & Ruzek, 1995).

Teacher training for implementation of comprehensive school health interventions has improved teacher attitude toward program implementation (Allison et al., 1990; Hausman & Ruzek, 1995), and positive teacher attitude toward implementation has resulted in increased implementation (Flannery & Torquati, 1993; Rohrbach et al., 1993; Ross et al., 1991; Tappe et al., 1995; Telljohann et al., 1996; Thornsen-Spano, 1996), although it has not been shown to increase extent or completeness and fidelity of implementation (Smith et al., 1993). Teachers who have the least trouble with implementation implement more completely and faithfully (Tappe, et al., 1995; Smith, et al., 1993). Integrity of delivery of a curriculum is a predictor of
improved student outcomes in some cases (Rohrbach et al., 1993). On-going training and supervision of the teachers seems important for continued effectiveness of interventions when students are at high risk of delinquency (Dryfoos, 1996). In classrooms where the teachers implementing a violence prevention curriculum teach proportionately more lessons, students’ use of aggression as a negotiating strategy is reduced (Aber et al., 1998).

Communication and relationship skills training are often a priority for teachers over further training on methods (Jones et al., 1990). There is an assumption that may interfere with teacher training that teaching is best learned on the job (Smylie & Kahne, 1997). Expectations of success play a role, and teachers who are skeptical about a curriculum require more training to better prepare them to implement (Hausman & Ruzek, 1995). Resentment may be created if training is mandated, making implementation less likely (Orpinas et al., 1996; Yang et al., 1998). Training must be introduced respectfully because teachers are experts and are extremely busy. They often must be convinced of the utility of further training for the prevention of aggressive behavior.

Many colleges of education spend minimal time addressing issues of classroom management and skills needed to address misbehavior in general and aggressive behavior in particular (Flaherty, 2000). Pre-service training of teachers often does not include classroom behavior management or the use of effective, respectful, and consistent discipline methods (Flaherty, 2000). Teacher education programs also tend to neglect working on interpersonal issues in teacher preparation (Adalbjarnardottir, 1994). Furthermore, minimal time is spent on issues of diversity and the behavior problems that may result simply from a teacher’s lack of understanding of students (Grant & Secada, 1990). There is almost no reliable literature on preparing teachers specifically for teaching African American students (Ladsen-Billings, 1994).
and little on preparing African American teachers to teach either African American or White students (Ladson-Billings, 1996a). Miscommunication problems between teachers and students created by lack of teacher understanding may reduce chances of student success and increase student frustration. Pre-service programs that address diversity superficially are unlikely to influence attitudes and beliefs long-held by those in teacher education programs (Causey et al, 1999; Leavell et al, 1999). Teachers should be trained to go beyond implementing curricula that address ethics or social skills, but rather to implement an inclusive school environment where they model the skills desired of the students (Petersen et al, 1998).

The effectiveness of pre-service education at making a genuine impact on preconceptions of teachers remains in question. Pre-service teachers sometimes use information learned in coursework to confirm preexisting beliefs rather than confront them (Kagan, 1992). Belief systems are resistant to change, even when contradicted by conflicting evidence (Pajares, 1992). Effective training methods for pre-service and in-service teachers that allow engagement in serious reflection on assumptions held about culturally diverse students and the relation between such assumptions and aggressive behavior remain to be identified. Different instructional activities require teachers to stretch their skills. A change in classroom management requires quite a bit more effort. A change in the way people relate to children may be an impossible task without much time and support, although improving teachers’ skills and abilities is believed to be the only way to do this (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In-service teachers, regardless of length of service, have reported lack of confidence in their ability to deal with aggression in the classroom, and 87% of teachers asked said they wanted more training (Boulton, 1997). Many new teachers leave the classroom before they have been teaching five years. These teachers often cite behavior problems as the reason they do not
stay in teaching (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1999). In a study of over 5000 American and Canadian teachers, Kuzman & Schnall (1987) found 63% of teachers identified student discipline problems as the most stressful factor in their work. Two out of 10 public school teachers (19%) in the United States say the problem of violence in their school is a factor in teachers leaving their school (Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., 1999). Even teachers who express confidence in their ability to control aggression in the classroom may not recognize the needs of their students. For example, many teachers do not recognize bullying to be a serious problem or greatly underestimate the extent of bullying at their school (O’Moore, 2000).

Teachers have a number of professional concerns including control of classes, planning instruction, and clerical work, as well as meeting the needs of students and motivating them to learn. Teaching too many students, meeting expectations of parents, and fitting into the school add to the burden teachers face. Weak leadership, poor school climate, and demoralized teachers are common in troubled schools (Gottfredson et al., 1998). Teachers may not be properly trained to handle the discipline problems they find in the classroom. Perceived self-efficacy for classroom management of practicing (in-service) teachers has been positively correlated with teacher burnout, a syndrome described as including emotional exhaustion, feelings of depersonalization toward others, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

**Teaching and culture**

**Diversity**

The original goal of multicultural education in schools was to provide students with information about different ethnic groups, however multicultural teaching is currently viewed as a method to address the disparity between the goals and the mission of schooling and students’
individual needs and concerns. Multicultural education is a process where individuals and groups work toward creating a society that recognizes and celebrates cultural diversity, and where there is equitable coexistence among cultural groups (Saldana & Waxman, 1997). Multicultural teaching addresses the serious miscommunication problems that can occur in classrooms when teachers do not understand their students’ social and cultural background (Lucas & Schecter, 1992). Multicultural education should also address the role of race and racism in the marginalization of African Americans and other minorities (Ladson-Billings, 1996b). Teachers may behave in ways that reward or punish some students simply for their social class, race, gender, or native language. Also, particularly if they are from the dominant culture, teachers can be blind to their own culture while accepting it as the norm against which all others are measured (Ladson-Billings, 1996b; Tatum, 1992).

Schools often ask for behavior or responses from students that do not match the child’s cultural identity. Students who are not members of the dominant (White) culture usually must choose between using home culture and language or school culture and language or must learn to switch between the two (Bakken & Dermon-Sparks, 1996; Smitherman, 1997). Behaviors that match a student’s cultural identity may be misinterpreted as disruptive at school. For example, African American children often communicate in an overlapping pattern of speech that teachers may misconstrue as interrupting, and Hispanic children often work together to solve problems when teachers from the dominant culture often value independent work. Teachers may even misconstrue such sharing as cheating.

One of the major educational problems of schools, particularly urban schools, is that the curriculum and teaching practices do not reflect the diversity within the population (Saldana & Waxman, 1997). The culture in which many minority children from urban cities live often
prevents them from acquiring the middle-class cultural patterns on which most school curricula and instructional materials are based. This lack of middle class cultural patterns is often viewed as a mismatch between the culture of the home and the school or a discrepancy between what schools are about and the needs and concerns of students (Ogbu, 1974). Many classroom teachers need assistance in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to bridge the gap between cultures. Teachers often express feelings of low self-esteem in their work with children of low socio-economic status and children of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Many African-American students do not have the same success rate in American public schools as Caucasian children. This discrepancy is not due to differences in ability (Teel et al., 1998). Rather, African-American students’ strengths, talents and culture are neither acknowledged in teacher attitudes, curriculum design, and practice nor validated in the evaluation of their schoolwork. Behavior that teachers may label lack of motivation may really be due to a student’s inability to feel connected with the activity of the classroom (Levin & Nolan, 2000). African-American students’ low achievement in school has been related to inappropriate teaching strategies that make it difficult for them to reach their full potential, thus alienating them from school (Teel et al., 1998). Some examples of these inappropriate teaching strategies are a reliance on reading as the sole method of gaining information, an emphasis on formal writing skills to demonstrate knowledge to the exclusion of other methods such as skits, models, or artwork, and the prevalent use of Euro-centric curricula. When students are tracked, students who do not look and act like the teacher are in greatest danger of being put in lower tracks. Placement in lower tracks often means less individualized instruction, leading to performance at lower levels. A cycle of poor performance that may be initiated by teacher bias is continued (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Additionally, African-American and Hispanic students are
disproportionately represented in school suspensions (Garibaldi et al., 1996), grade retention, and dropout rates (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Kaufman, 1991). It has been recommended that teachers examine their own assumptions about African-American students before trying to find solutions to gaps in achievement (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002).

Language minorities also experience disproportionate school failure (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986, Chapa, & Valencia, 1993), which is a matter of increasing concern due to the growing numbers of students who do not speak English as a first language. Census projections indicate White students will become the numerical minority by the middle of this century. This expected growth in language minorities is largely due to immigration (Arnow, 2000). Additionally, most (90%) African Americans use “black language,” identified as Ebonics, African American English (AAE), or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is well documented as an independent language (Smitherman, 1997). For further discussion, see Smitherman, 2000 and Rickford & Rickford, 2000. Cultural and language discontinuities between the schools and minority children, which reflect the culture of the dominant (again, White) group, are blamed for the persistent school failure demonstrated by these students (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Racial identity theory advances the idea that perceptions and beliefs about oneself and about others are influenced by the racial group or groups to which one belongs. Racial identity can be seen as incorporating aspects of personality and attitudes that are based on membership in a particular racial group. White racial identity development models are based on the consciousness of attitudes held by a person regarding the significance of being White (Helms, 1993; Rowe et al., 1994). Prejudice based on race can affect the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers must address racism both personally and in the classroom. Helms (1990)
noted that racial identity, as a multidimensional psychological construct, was more relevant and would account for a greater understanding of social dyadic processes than the less structurally complex demographic characteristic of race. Unlike racial identity, peoples’ racial category does not indicate how they think and feel about their race (Ladany, 1997).

Culturally relevant teaching

Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally relevant teaching as that which helps students share in knowledge building. Culturally relevant teaching views knowledge as something that is re-created and shared, views knowledge critically, is passionate about knowledge, helps students develop necessary skills, presumes student competency, and define excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity into account.

Cultural differences between students and their teachers increase the likelihood of misunderstandings. Schools are increasingly urban and populated by students of color, while teachers are predominately White and suburban. In the United States, 87% of the teachers are White, 8% Black or African American, and 3% Hispanic (National Education Association, 1992). On the other hand, the student population is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, especially in our urban areas. Currently, students of color form the majority in the 25 largest school districts in the United States, and it is projected that by the year 2010, these students will be the largest group in over 50 major cities (Carolina Population Center, 1997). Teachers often have concerns about working with diverse student populations and increasingly need to examine their beliefs, broaden their knowledge and develop skills for relating to students from diverse cultures (Evans et al., 1997). In-service training for teachers is essential to reduce institutional racism in the school setting (Banks, 2001). Given the changing demographics of students and
the concerns of teachers, a priority in teacher education programs should be to prepare teachers to work with students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Burstein & Cabello, 1989).

Research on urban education and teacher availability points to the scarcity of well-trained educational personnel to provide effective instruction to our increasingly diverse urban populations (Olmedo, 1997). Teachers from dominant cultures have an incomplete perspective about their students because they have been educated in a mono-culture way (Grant, 1999). Ladson-Billings (2001) believes that the failure of teachers to meet the needs of individual students is the major cause of student academic failure. Teachers need to learn about ways of looking at the world other than their own; teachers need to be aware of their own position in society and learn to view it critically.

Because most educators are trained in the tenets of their own discipline, they are strongly inclined to preserve what they know. As new knowledge is presented, the initial reaction is to evaluate the new information for its fit into the time-tested information which shapes their discipline (Allen, 1994). New information is used as long as it does not impede what has always been done. Therefore, when teachers do incorporate diversity education into the curriculum, the approach is often to follow the known path, perhaps using an additive approach to course revision rather than transforming the curriculum to better reflect classroom diversity.

A number of educators have written about the need for multicultural awareness and sensitivity as necessary components of effective teacher preparation programs for the urban environment (Banks, 1994b; Tatum, 1992). Multicultural training, diversity training, and racial and ethnic sensitivity programs have been recommended for prospective and active teachers (Haberman, 1991; Sleeter, 1992). As yet, multicultural programs that include this training have focused on implementation and have not focused on the evaluation of impact (Tettegah, 1996).
Diversity training has not been evaluated as a way to reduce aggression in schools other than in the context of conflict management. Neither has aggression been evaluated in the educational multicultural literature; however the framework provided by multicultural theory provides the structure needed to attempt a comprehensive exploration of the impact of violence on students individually. Researchers are beginning to recommend that multicultural programs, with an emphasis on understanding the influence of cultural backgrounds on the student behavior, be included in conjunction with violence prevention programs (Burwood & Wyeth, 1998; Kazdin, 1997; Peterson et al., 1998).

In summary, school and classroom climate change has been recommended for violence prevention interventions and multicultural education interventions in schools. Multicultural education theorists provide constructs for school climate change that encourage meeting children from the place from which they come. The recommendation that discipline be encouraged with peaceful, accepting, positive measures rather than punitive measures fits within the multicultural and the violence prevention framework.

**Extraordinary teachers**

Extraordinary teachers have been described by Stephenson (2001) as having six key characteristics: 1. they have great passion for their work, 2. they know what to teach, how to teach, and how to improve, 3. they excel at creating exciting classroom environments, 4. they connect exceptionally well with students, 5. they challenge students to reach their full potential, and 6. they get extraordinary results. Successful classroom teachers create a classroom and instructional learning environment that is supportive of students. They take a personal interest in students and relate to them well.
A national survey of adolescents showed that the single most common measure associated with healthy outcomes across all domains, including aggression, was having an emotionally supportive relationship with an adult (Resnick et al., 1997). Teachers and other school personnel were among those adults mentioned most frequently as the source of such support, and teacher-child relationships are associated with students’ competencies with peers in the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 1994). Teachers’ perceptions of relationships with students show classroom processes that do correlate with indicators of child success or failure (Pianta, 1999).

Sleeter and Grant (1988) suggested that teachers need to possess three areas of competency if they are to effectively instruct diverse children. Teachers need to possess a knowledge base in multicultural issues, they need to hold certain attitudes and beliefs about students, and they need to possess skills and procedures that would enable them to foster success in their students. Branch et al. (1993) also identified three components necessary for effective teaching for diversity: teacher support of students, classroom equity, and integration of students’ culture into the classroom. Banks (2001) identified six characteristics effective teachers must have in a multicultural society: 1. democratic attitudes and values, 2. a multicultural philosophy, 3. the ability to view events and situations from diverse points of view, 4. an understanding of the multidimensional nature of diversity, 5. knowledge of the stages of cultural identity and their curricular implications, and 6. the ability to teach at the higher levels of cultural identity. Generally, effective multicultural teaching focuses on the critical family and community issues that students encounter daily, and it helps students prepare themselves for meaningful social roles by emphasizing both social and academic responsibility. For example, teachers teach for diversity when they modify their teaching to take into account cultural backgrounds and
experiences of students in order to maximize participation. It is thought that active teaching approaches are effective for children who are having trouble in school because it simplifies discussion and allows children to engage in the materials (Kagan, 1990). Behavior problems resulting from a lack of matching of the student’s competencies to the competencies expected of them are thus avoided.

Respecting and validating students is recommended as a way to prevent problem behavior in the classroom (Ward, 1998). Children bring different experiences to the classroom and hold knowledge that should be respected. Adults should be willing to learn along with the children. Effective teachers have different concerns about their own professional practice than teachers who are less effective, likely because they solve their own problems and take charge of their own need to learn (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999).

When students feel like a part of their school (school connectedness) and feel cared for by the people at their school, they are less likely to engage in risky behavior including aggressive behavior (McNeely et al., 2002). School connectedness may be fostered by a school climate that treats students with respect (Flaherty, 2000). Positive classroom management and tolerant discipline policies are also associated with school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). The challenge for teachers is to meaningfully engage students in the community of the school.

Aggressive behaviors and other violent behavior in the schools interfere with a student’s ability to reach his or her academic potential. Schools are under a great deal of pressure to improve student academic performance and achievement. As school districts are increasingly judged by academic success of students, the positive effect of peaceful behavior on the academic condition of schools is the real benefit to the school system. Risky health behavior, including
aggressive and other anti-social behavior, has a negative impact on learning and academic outcomes (see Symons et al., 1997).

Some teachers are successful at preventing aggressive behavior in their classrooms, yet, it remains unclear what these teachers do. The identification and description of strategies used by teachers who are effective at preventing aggressive behavior at school is needed.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this chapter, I describe the research design of the study and how the two participating teachers were selected. I also describe data collection and data analysis procedures. A complete description of the participating teachers and of the school is found in Chapter 4.

Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to describe the strategies used by two teachers who were identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom. Extraordinary teachers were defined as those who are able to prevent aggressive behavior in the classroom, recognize when intervention between students is needed, and intervene in a meaningful and helpful way.

The research questions of the study are:

1. How do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?
2. How do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?
3. How do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior does happen?
4. In their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?

Research Design

This study is the result of my interest in the characteristics and quality of exceptional teachers in managing classrooms and preventing aggression, which I have not seen described in
the literature. I was interested in discovery and in-depth understanding rather than confirming hypotheses. A purposeful sample (Creswell, 1998, p. 119) seemed most useful; a large, random sample would not have led me to achieve my goal. It has been recommended that researchers evaluating violence prevention programs use qualitative data, culturally sensitive measures, and nontraditional evaluation designs to reduce problems, including ethical dilemmas, imposed by experimental designs (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991). Qualitative research allowed the finding of thorough information on how teachers act and react as agents of change.

I have used case study to describe the strategies used by two teachers who have been identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in their classrooms. Case study is a tradition of qualitative research that is often used in the field of education (Merriam, 1998). It allows the development of an in-depth understanding of a particular situation. It also allows the investigation of multiple variables and complex social interactions (Merriam, 1998, p.41), something not possible with quantitative methods, and it is useful for seeking both what is common and what is unusual about the case (Stake, 1994).

A case is a bounded system (Smith, 1978) or a specific phenomenon that is bounded in some way. A case must be specific (Stake, 1994), and bounding provides this specificity. The case I chose was bounded by grade level taught, by length of tenure teaching, by gender of the teacher, by socio-demographic characteristics of the student population, and, most importantly, by extraordinariness of the teacher at preventing aggressive behavior.

A case study can be conducted to understand the case itself or to provide insight into an issue while the case itself is of secondary interest. In this situation, the teachers (the case) were examined in depth, but understanding these teachers facilitated the understanding of something else. The choice of case was made because of the expectation that it would advance the
understanding of the issue of interest (Stake, 1994). My research questions led me to the issue of interest: how extraordinary teachers describe aggressive behavior and what they do to prevent aggression in the classroom. The personal characteristics of the teachers were only of secondary interest.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the data collection instrument. The researcher conducts the study in a natural setting, analyzes the participants’ words, and describes their views in detail while building a “complex, holistic picture” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). My interpretation of the teachers’ words and actions is an important part of the story I have constructed. My interpretations are not only unavoidable in the analysis but are important to it. I chose to use a constructivist paradigm, an interpretive approach, because in this way my own interpretations become a part of the data. Constructions are attempts to interpret experience (Schwandt, 1994) or to interpret the production of meanings (Stake, 1994). The purpose of inquiry in constructivism is the understanding of the interpretations held by both the participants and the researcher. Over time, the teachers and I worked toward consensus as we each become more aware of the constructions held. In this way, we were able to form even more informed constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Using an interpretive approach not only allowed but also required me to acknowledge my standpoint in the narrative of the case study. I was interested in the teachers’ descriptions of what works to prevent aggressive behavior in their classrooms and the socially constructed meaning their experiences hold, yet the teachers’ meaning was filtered through my own interpretation of their words and observations of their classrooms.

**Subjectivity statement**

My subjectivity has played a role in my research design. I believe that educators are professionals who do have the power to influence positively and negatively the lives of children.
The participating teachers were chosen based on this belief, and they knew in advance that they were chosen as teachers who do an extraordinary job of preventing aggressive behavior in their classrooms. I value the difficulty of the teaching profession and admire those who do it well.

Because the researcher is the data collection instrument, the narrative and the description of the classrooms are presented through my interpretation. The description of the climate of the classrooms is also as I interpreted it.

**Trustworthiness**

It is generally agreed that we must be able to trust the results of qualitative research, just as we must for quantitative research. There is some controversy about the criteria that are appropriate for assessing validity and reliability in qualitative research, but whether one calls procedures to ensure validity and reliability “trustworthiness” procedures (Creswell, 1998, p. 197) or something else, validity and reliability must be considered in qualitative research (for further discussion see Merriam, 1998, p. 198). Multiple sources of data were collected to improve trustworthiness.

External validity--or generalizability, in the traditional or quantitative sense--is increased by using more than one participant and by the use of interview questions that are pre-determined and specific (Merriam, 1998). Describing the case well enough that others may make comparisons with their own situations also may increase or enhance generalizability (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). However, generalizability was not the purpose of this case study and is not possible with a sample of two teachers. The purpose of the study is to increase knowledge about what these two extraordinary teachers did in their classrooms to prevent aggressive behavior. It is important to understand how teachers who are effective at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom interpret their effectiveness. It is also important to understand the methods these
teachers believe are effective at preventing aggressive behavior and their perceptions of how these methods are learned and implemented.

**Participants**

Sampling of participants for this case study was purposeful. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) allowed meaningful selection of participants with whom I could best answer the research questions. The two teachers chosen to participate in this case study were selected from teachers identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in their classrooms. These teachers were identified as being effective at managing classroom behavior. I limited my selection to teachers who have been teaching for a minimum of three years and who differed by race or ethnicity but not by gender. I chose only female teachers. It would have been difficult to compare and contrast the strategies used by the two teachers if both race and gender differed and I desired a racial or ethnic difference in the participants.

I chose middle school (grades six through eight) because students at this age are at a stage where social relationships grow more complicated, differences are not as well accepted as when younger, and the highest levels of aggression are generally observed among these students (Bosworth et al., 1999; Dishion et al., 1997). Children at these grade levels are also young enough that prevention efforts for aggressive behavior may be more effective than when students are older, when such behaviors are more firmly entrenched.

Both teachers were faculty members of the same middle school in the Southeastern United States. The school is newly designated as a Title One school, a change planned for during the time I spent there. Title One is a federal program that provides funds for impoverished schools. In the 2002-2003 academic year, when the data were collected, approximately 85% of the students in the school received free or reduced-price lunch.
Participant selection

My research questions dictated that I limit my search for extraordinary teachers to a school system in which the students were diverse culturally, racially, and financially. I studied the racial composition and free and reduced-price lunch numbers of eight counties in Georgia to make this selection. The student population in most of the schools in the eight counties did not meet my needs for the study. Most were overwhelmingly White and most had very few students who were from homes that were at or below the poverty level. I met with a number of principals in several counties, and one school principal in a county that met my diversity requirements did agree to participate. With his support, I was able to gain permission to conduct research in that county.

I asked the principal of the school in which I wanted to conduct research for permission and recommendation of teachers who met the selection criteria of being female of differing race or ethnicity with at least three years of teaching experience and who were “really good” at managing classroom behavior. He named two teachers who met these criteria. I then asked the school counselor and the instructional lead teacher for their recommendations. They each named the same two teachers.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

The data collection procedures included an initial in-depth interview of the two teachers, multiple informal interviews, participant observation of each classroom, and school documents and other general observations of the teachers and students. After the initial in-depth interview, I collected data over a period of approximately 2½ months. In this time I spent 14 school days and a few extra partial days with each teacher. During this time I also conducted 15-20 informal
interviews with each teacher. Data collection began in March 2003 and ended on the last day of school in May 2003.

In-depth interviews

After the teachers were identified and had consented to participate, an initial semi-structured interview of approximately 1½ hours was conducted with each of them individually. The initial interviews were conducted at the school, which was the teachers’ preferred location. I took notes during the initial interviews, and with each teacher’s permission, I tape-recorded the interviews for later transcription. The interviews were conversational and comfortable. I used an interview guide to standardize the initial interviews to some degree; however, the order of questions and the inclusion of questions varied depending on responses. Some questions were answered before they were asked. The research questions and initial interview protocol are shown in Table 3.1. The initial interview preamble read to both teachers is shown in Appendix B.

I made several assumptions that are evident in the interview questions. The first is that aggressive behavior does happen at school in every classroom. Extraordinary teachers are very good at handling such behavior, but that does not mean the behavior does not exist. How the teachers describe such behavior is of great interest. The second assumption is that conflict does arise when students are different from one another. Teachers may not use the language of cultural diversity and culturally responsive teaching, but some actions will be necessary on the part of any teacher to address diversity in the classroom. The third assumption is that even teachers who do an extraordinary job of preventing aggressive behavior will need to intervene between students at some time. They differ, however, in when they choose to intervene and in what strategies they choose to use to intervene.
Table 3.1
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic information</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>With what race(s) do you identify yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>What grade(s) do you teach?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years of teaching experience</td>
<td>How long have you been teaching (including this school year)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites and levels of teaching experience (Gender)</td>
<td>How long have you been teaching at this school?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What degrees have you received?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Where did you go to school? What field(s) did you study?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you attended any workshops on violence prevention? Did you find meaningful experiences during these workshops?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have any other experiences been important to you in your education?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How many students are usually in your classroom? How many would you describe as mildly disruptive? Heavily disruptive?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Questions and prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?</td>
<td>Would you describe your classroom for me? The students in your classroom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you take me through a typical day in your classroom? What are some of the expectations you have for the students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Even the best teachers encounter problems of misconduct/disruption/aggression in their classrooms. Could you describe these?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imagine you could create a violence free classroom. What would it look like? Sound like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?</td>
<td>What you do in the classroom that you perceive to be important in preventing violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does what you do work differently with different children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do the children do when you do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior does happen?</td>
<td>What situations have happened in your classroom that required you to intervene between students? What did you do? How did what you did work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there times that you believe teacher intervention is not needed, although conflict occurs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you tell me more about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?</td>
<td>Frequently conflict arises because students are different (race, culture, socio-economic status, gender, clothing). What do you do to avoid this kind of conflict? How do you handle it when it does happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kinds of relationships do you have with students? Examples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the relationship vary with different students/students who act in different ways?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Informal interviews

I had conversations with each teacher at different times during the day each time I observed her classroom. These conversations took place during planning time, at lunch, before and after school, and sometimes during class time. I talked with the teachers from 15 to 20 times over the course of the study. One conversation took place on a school bus. Notes were taken during these conversational interviews but they were not tape-recorded as this might have interfered with the conversations. The focus of these conversations was cumulative, meaning that what we had talked about previously and what had happened during the entire time spent in the classroom established the context for the next conversation. Ongoing, less structured, interviews provided an opportunity for further examination of the research questions in response to my observations of the interactions in the classroom. Questions asked in the interviews were refined as discussion and observation continued throughout the study. I always had questions jotted in my field notes to discuss when the next opportunity for conversation came up (either later that day or the next time I came to observe). Interviewing provided an unfolding picture of the teachers’ understanding of what aggressive behavior is, methods and strategies used to prevent aggressive behavior, methods and strategies chosen when intervention between students is necessary, and how the teachers accounted for cultural differences in their efforts to prevent or reduce aggressive behavior.

Each day I recorded my thoughts in a research journal as soon as I left the school for the day. These thoughts were not shared with the teachers but did provide for many questions to ask them and ideas of what to watch for as I continued my time with each teacher.
Participant observation

Participant observation is not controversial but is not easy to define (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). It can be difficult to establish the role of the observer in an observational experience, and a true dichotomy of observer having an established role in the experience to that of observer as an outsider is not useful in many cases. Sometimes the role of the observer as complete participant or complete observer is unclear, and the researcher is somewhere between these roles. My role in the classrooms of these two teachers varied from participating totally to observing alone, seemingly forgotten.

I observed the classroom of each of the two extraordinary teachers for entire school days 14 different times over a period of approximately 2½ months. I also spent additional time with each teacher in increments of less than whole days. For example, I sometimes spent part of one teacher’s planning period watching one class period of the other teacher (as the planning periods were an hour and a half long). I varied the days of the week and number of times during the week that I observed each teacher. Sometimes I would observe two days in a row, and sometimes I would observe only once in a given week. Some days that I I planned ahead with the teachers to come, and other days that I observed with no prior word that I was coming. Enough time was spent in each classroom that I soon blended in and was often forgotten. It was not relevant that I remain a total observer, however, and I helped in the classrooms in a variety of ways when it was wanted or needed. During my observations of the classrooms, I considered myself an observer who could participate when the situation warranted it or the teacher requested it. My interactions with the students and with the teacher were recorded as a part of the observation.
During my time observing, I examined the interactions of the teacher with the students and of the students with each other. I included in my field notes a description of each classroom, including my perceptions of the classroom climate. Because I was the only observer of the teachers’ classrooms, description and comparison of the two teachers was consistent.

I observed each teacher on a rotating basis so that I spent different days of the week in each classroom. In this way the ebbs and flows of energy that occur during the week were accounted for. Some weeks I spent two or three days in a row with one teacher, and some weeks I alternated days to varying degrees. This allowed the most complete picture possible of the teachers’ classrooms as the weeks progressed. Because I observed from late winter until the end of the school year, I was able to see different portions of the academic year in each classroom as well as different days of the week.

I developed an observation protocol to provide consistency across observations. The protocol allowed not only a description of the interactions between the people in the classroom but also for description of the classroom itself including my perceptions of the classroom climate. The observation protocol is shown in Table 3.2. Additionally, both descriptive and reflective notes were recorded during my time observing.

All field notes were transcribed as quickly as possible after the observation, often the same evening. Thoughts about the day were also recorded in a research journal immediately after leaving the school for the day. The transcribed field notes were expanded as needed to include these daily reflections, although the field notes were given to the teachers to check over (member check as described below) before they were expanded with these reflections. Comparison was made between the teachers in the research journal and these comparisons were also not shared with the teachers.
Table 3.2

CLASSEEEO ROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draw the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the day’s schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the children’s interactions with each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the children’s interactions with the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe my interactions in the classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I asked the two teachers to read over their own interview transcript and the observation descriptions of their own classroom (member check). They were asked to review each for accuracy and were permitted to make corrections or changes as they desired. We can feel threatened by the documentation of what we say and do. Member check not only is important for the checking the content of the data by the teachers but also allowed them some control over the data that they may not have felt comfortable with. One teacher was quite familiar with the procedures of qualitative research. The other was less familiar and seemed more comfortable once she saw what I was recording in my field notes. Neither teacher requested substantive changes in the initial interview transcription or the field notes.

Documents and other observations

Triangulation, or using multiple sources of data to confirm findings, helps verify the repeatability of an observation or interpretation by demonstrating the findings in different ways
These extra observations and documents gave me a clearer picture of the school climate and of how the students behaved when not in the classes I was observing.

I attended grade-level meetings, faculty meetings, and school-improvement council meetings. I was asked to be a (community) member of the school improvement council, and as a member was able to talk about plans to improve teacher-student relationships school-wide. I observed lunch in the lunchroom on numerous occasions, sometimes sitting and talking with the teachers and sometimes alone so I could better observe the students.

Documents collected included the discipline plan for the county, a copy of test results for the annual state-level progress exam, overall school discipline records, a copy of the school improvement plan, and a report of the current socio-demographic status of the students, a moving number at this school.

Approval to Conduct Research

Permission to conduct research was sought and given from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia and from the participating school district. Verbal consent of the principal of the school was given. Verbal consent was then sought from and given from the individual teachers. At the time of the initial interview, written consent was requested and given by both teachers. A copy of the consent form for the participating teachers is found in Appendix B. Results of the study were shared with the participating teachers, and a report was made to both the principal of the school and to the school district office. Additionally, results were shared with the entire faculty of the school in a workshop that took place during a teacher planning day the following school year. The identity of the two teachers was not given, but the faculty was aware that the recommendations were based on teachers who are “really good” at managing classroom behavior in their own school with the students they teach.
Data Analysis

Field work is a concurrent process of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 1998). As I collected and transcribed the teacher interviews and the observation field notes, I first worked to create a rich description of the two teachers and their classrooms. The teachers were given copies of the initial interview and the field notes (without my added thoughts) to check for accuracy at several different times as field work was continuing. Although pseudonyms have been used for both the teachers and the students in these teachers’ classrooms, I did not switch to pseudonyms until after this member check had been done. Hard copies of the transcripts were created to allow for physical management of the data. I read the interview transcripts and the expanded observational field notes line by line to identify themes and commonalities, as well as issues to pursue in later interviews. Open coding was used to identify categories in the data. As I identified categories, I used different colors of highlighter to mark them. I continued to examine the categories I was identifying in my daily research journal.

I used my research questions to focus the analysis toward the purpose of the study. Once broad categories or themes were identified, I began focusing the coding, even as data collection continued. I grouped data by category and then narrowed the coding to begin to identify the strategies used to prevent aggressive behavior.

As I continued data collection, ongoing comparison allowed me to look for patterns and to compare and contrast the two teachers and their classrooms. I was able to ask the teachers about the strategies I saw them using. Ongoing comparison also allowed me to focus on what to watch for when some of the strategies I expected to see based on previous research were not used by both teachers.
The final process of data analysis was researcher interpretation (Creswell, 1998), or my own interpretation of the case and its importance based on the research questions. The story of the teachers and their classrooms is my story based my own interpretation of the strategies the teachers were using. I supported this interpretation with description and with quotes to allow the reader to also interpret what is done in these two classrooms to successfully prevent aggressive behavior and to manage it when it occurred.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

In this chapter I describe the two extraordinary teachers who participated in the study and the school where they teach. I include a physical description of each teacher’s classroom and of the school. I also discuss the climate created in the classroom by the teachers. The descriptions are based on my observations of the teachers, but I have also included information about the training each teacher had, which was gathered in the initial interviews.

Ms. King

Ms. King was a small woman with a very loud voice. She had long hair that was often untied or tied back loosely, and she often wore flowing dresses with Birkenstock sandals. She moved almost constantly. Ms. King was young and Caucasian. She taught math to students in the 7th grade, and had been teaching at this school for 8 years.

Ms. King’s energy was almost palpable. She walked around her classroom to help students, walked out to monitor the hall, and walked back in talking all the while. When discussing math concepts, Ms. King used her entire body. She constructed a giant number-line in her classroom and jumped along it to demonstrate negative and positive numbers. She used her arms and legs to demonstrate geometry concepts. Ms. King never used her desk.

I was left with the impression, as I watched Ms. King move around the room, that she could do two or three things at once. She could get the students started on an assignment, check off completed homework, and monitor the hall all at once. She paid attention constantly and so could help a group of students at the same time that she noticed another group was off task.
Although she moved and talked quickly, Ms. King always stopped to listen to students. She listened well and gave them her complete attention. She was patient with students when they talked to her. What they wanted to ask or say was obviously important to her.

Ms. King’s classroom was very organized and neat. The room was square with blue carpet and a reddish stripe running around the edge. A poster in back said “It’s not the ‘I.Q’. but the ‘I will’ that’s important.” I think this described her expectations of students well. All of the cabinets and shelves were labeled and her white-board was neatly divided to allow classes of different levels to see the appropriate work for the day. The floor was clean, and the walls were colorfully decorated with students’ work. Projects hung from the ceiling like large mobiles. A table at the front of the room had multiple small shelves for students’ work. Her desk, which was in the front corner of the room opposite the door, was virtually clear on top and was almost blocked off by a stool and podium. This was not a place requiring a clear path to it as she did not sit behind it. The shelves behind her desk were full of plastic bins of supplies for the students to use. The windows were covered with many colors of paint, and the door to the outside was sometimes propped open to allow fresh air into the room.

Ms. King also helped students remain organized. They were expected to put away supplies and clean the room after each period. Each of the students was given an agenda book by the school at the beginning of the year. Students were to keep track of both their school work and their weekly “discipline cards” in this agenda book. Ms. King checked to see that students wrote down assignments. She kept her own agenda book in a rack on a large cabinet next to the door and wrote in all of the assignments using a different color pen for the different classes she taught. In this way, students who had missed work, either because of an absence or because of a suspension, might easily see what they needed to make up.
Supplies needed in the classroom were always provided. A rack in the back of the room held six plastic containers filled with rulers, colored pencils, calculators, glue, scissors, and permanent markers. Students were responsible for keeping these boxes neat and for letting Ms. King know when something needed to be replaced. A large box at the front held additional supplies including replacements for the small boxes, extra pencils, and notebook paper.

She also worked to organize the entire grade level. She had made four student passes, two for each gender, for each of the seventh grade teachers. The passes had the teacher’s picture on them and were the way students were permitted to be in the hall (to use the bathroom, for example). Ms. King advocated for regular grade-level meetings where teachers shared information and concerns. They met once a week during their free period to eat lunch together and talk. These talks followed an agenda and included discussion of concerns about individual students and about teaching strategies. She also actively coordinated her math plans with the other seventh grade math teacher.

The classroom was designed for students to use it. There were big pillows on the floor in the back of the room to use if they needed to spread out or if they did not feel well. Ms. King had her four hall passes stuck with Velcro on the wall near the door so they were easy for the students to both pick up and return, although they did need her permission to leave the classroom. There was a pencil sharpener on every wall, and they did not need to ask for permission to get up and move around the classroom to use them.

The desks in this classroom were grouped into what Ms. King called pods. Four to six desks faced each other and had their legs duct-taped together. This provided groups for students to work together. It was clear from the physical lay out of the room that conversation was expected. In fact, this classroom was rarely quiet.
Students had some control in this classroom. They were allowed to get up to get Kleenex or sharpen a pencil without asking. She listened to their ideas of how to do activities. They also helped choose their pod-mates. At the beginning of the year, Ms. King had students list who they would like to sit with and who they would prefer not to sit with. From these lists, she assigned seats in the pods that allowed students to sit with at least some friends (and to not sit anywhere near someone they would prefer not to work with).

The pods were often, although not always, composed of a single gender. Some pods had just Hispanic or African-American children but most were racially mixed. No pods had just Caucasian students, but each class had few Caucasian students. It was clear that friendships have been made across racial boundaries as one watched students work together in these pods.

Ms. King was working on an advanced degree in educational foundations (her interest was cultural anthropology). She was interested in the local history of education for African Americans. Her master’s degree was in middle-grade education with a focus on multicultural education. Her undergraduate work was in science education. This educational history describes Ms. King in two important ways. First, she was very interested in the education of African American students. Second, as a math teacher, she was teaching out of field.

Ms. King was hired when she stopped a fight (in a common area, not in the classroom) while working as a substitute teacher at this school. She was newly out of college at the time. The opening was for a math teacher, and she agreed to finish out the year in math but was asked to continue because her students had made such good progress. Much work has been done by the administration to maintain her math position (her certification is in science).

Ms. King had no training specifically to prevent aggressive behavior in the classroom, although she helped with the peer mediation program in place at this school. Recognized as
someone with good classroom management skills, she has taught other teachers about positive classroom management strategies at training workshops.

**Ms. Andrews**

Ms. Andrews moved slowly, talked slowly, and watched carefully. She wore smart matching tops and pants and had her hair neatly styled. Due to problems with her knees, she walked with some difficulty. She sat at her desk at the front of the room and rarely got up, but she moved her arms with great expression as she talked. She was almost always smiling. Ms. Andrews was a middle-aged African-American woman who did not share her age (she warned her students rather lovingly to stop trying to figure it out when she talked to them about when she was in school). Teaching was her second career. She taught 8th grade language arts, and she had been teaching language arts at this school for 7 years.

Ms. Andrews had a happy, lilting voice that was not really loud but that carried. The slow tempo and varying range she used as she spoke made it sound almost like she was singing or was close to breaking into song. Her voice was encouraging, even when she was correcting student misbehavior. Her voice expressed her emotions. She did not move about her room, but her voice did.

Ms. Andrews’ desk was covered with piles of papers. Books lay on her desk, on the shelves, and on the countertop across one side of the room. She seems to know where everything was, however. She could pull a needed paper from a pile with no searching or difficulty. I repeatedly thought “organized chaos” when I was in her room.

Ms. Andrews’ room felt comfortable and welcoming. Her counter and shelves, like her desk, were full of books and papers. Like Ms. King’s room, it was square and carpeted. Windows across one side of the room allowed a good deal of light in. Rose-colored curtains
surrounded the windows above her desk, which was at the front of the room. Because she taught language arts and reading, she had small shelves holding books in the back two corners of the room and in each area of free wall space along the sides of the room. The counter ran the entire length of the room opposite the windows, and here students piled possessions and worked on the computer. A table at the front of the room held supplies like colored pencils, scissors and paper. Later it held many library books for students to use to do research for a writing project on flight. The room itself did not seem cluttered, just the periphery. A bulletin board in front was designed and finished by students. It was a room where students walked in talking and put down their belongings like they were at home.

Student desks in Ms. Andrews’ classroom were moved several times during the time I spent in her classroom. One week they were in rows facing the back of the room so she could use the overhead projector onto the white board on the back wall to explain parts of the research project. The next week, they faced the front of the room to better watch a movie on the book they were reading. The majority of the time the desks were divided down the center of the room and facing each other. This encouraged conversation across the room while allowing students to see the front and back of the room with relative ease.

Ms. Andrews tried to integrate language arts/reading with other subjects, and she worked on several projects with other eighth grade teachers during the time I observed her. She worked with the science teachers to integrate her research paper on flight with making working models of planes and flying them. She organized a field trip to Lockheed/Martin so students could see real planes being built. She worked with the social studies teachers to integrate history with a book her class was reading that included the lynching of a Black man. She also actively coordinated with the other language arts teacher for the eighth grade.
Ms. Andrews had a master’s degree in accounting and a degree in middle grades education with an emphasis on language arts and social studies. Because she was older, she lived through integration of the schools in the United States. She was removed from her all Black elementary school and placed in a school where she was “the only Black in my class…because of the level I was on.” As a gifted student, she was chosen to help integrate the White schools, and she was the only African American in her graduating class. She had experienced change of culture twice: first when she moved to the all White school and again when she chose to attend a historically -Black college. She told me “it was a total culture shock. I mean, I did not identify with my own people.” She described both as profound learning experiences.

Ms. Andrews spoke fluent “Black English” with her African American students, although she only used Standard English while teaching. She knew and understood the neighborhoods her students lived in, and she talked to them about their lives in an inclusive, laughing, understanding way. She was constantly correcting her African American students’ Standard English in the classroom, and the students did not mind because she knew and respected their own way of speaking, too. This seemed to help her with Hispanic students, as well. She respected home language even as she taught Standard English.

Ms. Andrews was physically active as a student and as a younger adult and as a cheerleader and a dancer. She still coached both the cheerleaders and the step-dance club at the middle school. Her students respected her previous experience, although her ability to move was now severely limited.

As I have written, teaching was a second career for Ms. Andrews. She described her experience working with adults as a kind of teaching and said she used many of the same skills
now that she used with adults. Ms. Andrews had extensive training in conflict management for adults, as she had worked for the Internal Revenue Service in income tax law for 10 years. She felt these lessons were applicable to her students. She also attended a behavior management class when she was in college, although in this class she was told she (her emphasis) would need to learn how to deal with White children; she would need to get to know their background.

**The School**

The school building was designed like a large star with a large central open area and halls radiating from this center. The building had six wings: one was for the offices and the cafeteria/auditorium, two were for the exploratory classes and the media center, and the other three were for the three grade levels, one wing for each grade. The floors were white and clean, and the wings were painted different colors to help identify them. Student projects filled the walls and display cases on the wings. The central open area had a large fichus tree with benches around it. It was a comfortable place to sit. It also allowed an administrator to look down all halls essentially at once.

The socio-demographic distribution of students had been changing over the past several years due to both a change in how students were assigned to middle school in the county and to an increase in the Hispanic population on this side of the county. The zoning divisions in the county created middle schools that did not share the same racial distribution, largely due to the continued segregation of housing and the location of public housing complexes. Racial diversity was primarily due to the increase in Hispanic students into a school where most students were African-American. A little more than 70% of the students were African American, and approximately 18% were Hispanic, mostly of Mexican descent. Caucasian students were the racial minority at almost 12% of the student population. Approximately 85% of the students
received either free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of the poverty level of the students in the school. This percentage had risen by almost 30% in the last 3 years, when school system zoning changes were implemented.

Students moved from classroom to classroom during the day to study different academic subjects with teachers who specialized in different content areas. Students studied math and language arts in classes where they were grouped with other students of similar academic level or ability. Classes were divided into low or remedial level, on-level, and accelerated or advanced level for these two subjects. Social studies and science classes were not divided in this manner. Exploratory classes, such as music, art, health, and physical education, were also all-inclusive. Table 4.1 shows a typical day in Ms. King’s and Ms. Andrews’ classrooms.

The school had three administrators: a principal, an assistant principal and an instructional lead teacher. Two were female, and one was African American. Most teachers were female and Caucasian and all were middle class. The average time teaching at the school was approximately 8 years, although this average was dropping.

The turnover rate for teachers was somewhat high at the school. Informally, during planning meetings and school improvement plan workshops, teachers reported that they felt challenged by discipline problems. Inability to handle discipline problems further resulted in the decision not to renew contracts of several teachers at the end of the current school year. Over half of the students were suspended during the academic year preceding this study. These students were removed from the classroom by teachers and sent to the office. Most students who were suspended stayed in the school, rather than being sent home. Many of them spent the suspension days in a separate classroom designed only for in-school suspension; others were assigned to spend their suspension days in a classroom with the same teacher all day who was
Table 4.1

**A TYPICAL DAY IN THE TEACHERS’ CLASSROOMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Ms. King (Math)</th>
<th>Ms. Andrews (Language Arts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homeroom</td>
<td>Eighth period class for 10 minutes</td>
<td>Eighth period class for 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Period 1 | Accelerated class  
21 students, 9 were state identified as gifted  
Approximately half of class was African American, one-quarter was Hispanic, and one-quarter was Caucasian  
Different text book from other classes, more advanced assignments | Low level (very low)  
23 students, 8 came with a collaborating teacher  
Approximately three-quarters of class was African American and one-quarter was Hispanic |
| Period 2 | Low level (very low)  
27 students, 10 came with a collaborating teacher  
Approximately three-quarters of class was African American and one-quarter was Hispanic (two Caucasian students) | Connections  
Students went to exploratory class, a shorter period |
| Period 3 | Low to on-level  
Racial distribution roughly matched school | Connections  
Students went to exploratory class, a shorter period |
| Period 4 | Lunch  
7th period students  
Teachers took students to cafeteria, split lunch duty every other week | Low to on-level  
18 students  
Racial distribution roughly matched school |
| Period 5 | Connections  
Students went to exploratory class, a shorter period | Advanced, all state-identified gifted students on team were in this class  
21 students  
Approximately half African American and half Caucasian |
| Period 6 | Connections  
Students went to exploratory class, a shorter period | Lunch  
7th period students  
Teachers took students to cafeteria. Sometimes students ate in room |
| Period 7 | On-level, next to highest class  
20 students  
Racial distribution roughly matched school | On-level, next to highest class  
18 students  
Racial distribution roughly matched school |
| Period 8 | On-level  
19 students  
Racial distribution roughly matched school | On-level  
14 students  
Racial distribution roughly matched school |
| Period 9: Study skills | Group differed by day. One of her classes came back to study or start homework | Group differed by day. One of her classes came back to study or start homework |
not their regular teacher. This type of suspension was also called in-school suspension, and students sat in the desk the teachers called the in-team seat. This seat was set aside for teachers on the same team to use when a student needed to be removed from a classroom but did not need to be sent to the office. The principal believed that many of the teachers at the school needed training in managing aggressive behavior and in teaching diverse students, and further believed these two issues were related. The teachers had approved a school improvement plan that included this training as one of the objectives.

The school had developed a mission statement that reflected the interest of the administration and staff in creating a safe and accepting environment for the students. The school improvement plan included the goal of better meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study is to describe the strategies used by school teachers who are extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom. In this chapter, I organize the results based on the four research questions: 1. how do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?, 2. how do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?, 3. how do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior does happen?, and 4. in their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?

**How do extraordinary teachers describe aggression?**

Both teachers described aggressive behavior in the initial interview and then further described aggressive behaviors during the days I spent in their classrooms. Teachers agreed that physical aggression toward other students such as fighting, hitting, and pushing were the behavior most often considered aggressive. They also agreed that aggressive behavior included verbal aggression. We often talked about aggressive behavior in the context of how it disrupted the classroom, as well as how it was used to hurt students in some way. In addition to aggression between students, both teachers described aggression towards students from other adults in the school. Although both described times in the past that students had been aggressive toward them, it was clear by what I saw and what they said that neither considered student aggression toward them to be an issue in their classrooms.

Ms. King and Ms. Andrews identified physical fights between students as aggressive behavior, but they held different beliefs and feelings about why these fights occur. Ms. King
described fights as aggressive behavior between students, yet in our on-going interviews she spoke several times about the need for adults to recognize when behavior was escalating and to intervene early. She indicated that school fights were preventable and that adults should recognize when students are “posturing” and intervene immediately. She said that fights between students are usually to “save face” in front of peers and that most students do not really want to fight, they just do not want to be embarrassed. “They want to be stopped,” she said in the initial interview. As she talked about fights, I believe she put most of the responsibility for the fights on the adults rather than the students who were involved in them.

Ms. Andrews also described aggression in terms of physical fights between students but included issues related to gang membership such as threats, physical assault, and armed robbery. She believed these issues affected a number of her students outside her classroom and classified fights at school as related to what happened outside of school. Yet she explained that these issues must be “left at her door.” She emphasized with her students that they must be physically safe in her classroom, as well as safe to express ideas.

Both teachers further defined aggression as verbal aggression between students but they discussed verbal aggression in terms of preventing it by constructing a safe space for students to be themselves without fear of being teased. Each specifically identified teasing as inappropriate behavior, and I believe that both considered teasing to be as inappropriate as fighting. For Ms. Andrews, aggressive behaviors can be manifested in multiple ways, and she returned repeatedly to her responsibility to make her classroom a safe place for students.

Ms. King similarly emphasized that the climate in her classroom worked to prevent all types of aggressive behavior. She did not consider students to be disruptive in her class, and she defined aggressive behavior that was disruptive in terms of what is not (her emphasis) disruptive
in her classroom: “not conversation, not movement, not fighting against illogical rules.” She passionately explained that students “work” is in the classroom and that they must be able to meet their own needs there. These needs might include talking to each other or moving around the classroom to sharpen a pencil, ask a question, or throw away trash. Sometimes students need help from one another and must be permitted to ask for, and provide, this help. She also indicated that rules to prevent disruptions that led to aggressive behavior should be agreed upon by the students, be fair, and then be enforced.

Neither teacher mentioned student aggressive behavior directed toward her when describing aggressive behavior. We talked about this behavior only because I asked about it. Ms. King stated she did not tolerate verbal aggression toward her of any kind and so this sort of aggressive behavior did not happen in her classroom. She told me in the initial interview that she simply stopped and re-directed “the conversation” when students began to argue, telling the student they would have a chance to talk later. As I watched her with students I saw that they actually do have this chance to talk. Ms. King did not let students yell or shout at her but interrupted them and repeated what she wanted them to do. She did not get angry, although she was very firm. She also dealt specifically with the behavior rather than getting angry at the child. For example, she stopped a boy who threw himself onto the classroom floor to get attention. She took him into the hall and explained to him why his behavior was disruptive without allowing him to argue or talk back. He was angry, but once he was not arguing, she allowed him to explain his behavior. He remained upset with the consequence but was sad rather than angry. Similarly, Ms. Andrews did not describe either physical or verbal aggression toward her when I asked her to define aggressive behavior. Several times, I saw her stop students who were not doing as she asked, and she did not allow them to argue with her. She interrupted them,
told them they would have a chance to talk later, and went on teaching the class. Later, when the student was calmer, he or she was given a chance to talk to her, but never while still angry. Ms. Andrews did not get angry. She was firm and dealt with the behavior but never grew upset herself.

I talked with the teachers about student disruptive behavior and misbehavior in the classroom as we discussed aggressive behavior. Each gave an example of what she considered a major classroom disruption to be. Ms. King described a major disruption as one that involves multiple children. Ms. Andrews also spoke of such disruption in the context that the entire class was involved. Both felt such disruptions were preventable.

Interestingly, when I first asked Ms. King to define aggressive behavior, she categorized it in terms of teachers’ and school-based police officers’ lack of understanding of children. She saw aggression from adults toward students, rather than aggressive behavior between students or from students toward teachers, as the issue of primary importance in this school. She emphasized that a teacher’s lack of understanding of a student could lead to escalation toward violence and that teachers must respect students’ feelings and their space.

In later conversations, Ms. Andrews identified very similar problems of adults in the school not acting appropriately toward the students. She identified behaviors of teachers who disciplined inconsistently and who punished harshly when they themselves had lost control, and she talked about the need for teachers to mentor each other.

In summary, both teachers defined aggression in terms of physical student aggression. In addition, each included verbal aggression between students and aggression directed toward students from adults. As they defined aggressive behavior, neither named student aggression toward adult. Both teachers interwove into their definitions of aggressive behavior the need to
prevent aggressive student behavior by creating a challenging and accepting classroom climate, and the need for adults to intervene immediately when problems occur.

**How do extraordinary teachers prevent aggression?**

Both teachers considered the prevention of aggressive behavior in their classrooms to be a classroom climate issue. Each felt a positive classroom environment where students were free to express themselves was critical to learning and to the prevention of problem student behavior. Ms. Andrews emphasized prevention of student aggression as related to appropriate, quality instruction, and Ms. King highlighted such prevention as related to the understanding of diversity and to classroom climate. However, each used quality instruction *and* culturally responsive teaching to create classrooms where expectations were high, instruction was used to keep students interested and on task, and where respect for all students was expected and role-modeled.

Ms. Andrews interpreted prevention of aggressive behavior to be an instructional issue. She said “I have to find out what will interest them and then take that concept back to my lesson. As long as I keep them on task by giving them something they are interested in, all arguments diffuse.” I saw her do this often during the time I observed her classroom. For example, she asked about music they liked and let them write different kinds of poetry to the music they chose. They were even encouraged to bring their own “clean” music to write by. She often included examples of what was going on in the church or in the neighborhood when she explained a concept in a poem or a book. She also included other classes, often social studies or science, in her discussions to tie all the subjects together. She asked the students about movies they had seen or what they knew of current world events and then tied these back into what was being discussed.
Ms. King named “eliminating self-doubt” as essential to preventing aggressive behavior. She eliminated self-doubt by providing a classroom where students were allowed to meet their own needs, to move, and to have conversations, and where they were provided the tools they needed. She believed high expectation were essential to academic and behavioral success, and felt the two were related. She illustrated the connection of high expectation to academic success with an example of giving homework:

That makes me furious, teachers who don’t give homework, because you’re saying you’re not smart enough to do homework. So, even though all the Atlanta schools, all the Gwinnett schools are sending home 2 hours of homework to their 7th graders, since your reading level happens to be a grade below what theirs is, then you’re not smart enough.

Ms. King described her efforts to prevent aggressive behavior in terms of using culturally responsive teaching methods and in terms of respecting student difference, and I often observed her use these strategies. For example, student knowledge was acknowledged and respected, she normally allowed students to work together, and she was tolerant of students interrupting each other. She even reminded students to work together to learn from each other. She drew knowledge from them by starting where they were and let them use the knowledge they already had to build to new concepts. For example, she always introduced a new subject by asking what students already knew about it. Ms. King also respected student words and language. She often asked Hispanic students appropriate Spanish words to use and worked to use them. She interjected Spanish words into her sentences often. She also understood Black English quite well and often used the students’ words as she spoke to them. She stopped students to clarify words she did not understand, meaning they taught her, too.

Both teachers allowed students to work together often, which permitted collaborative learning and allowed students to talk to each other. The teachers allowed some student
conversation and identified this as a basic need of the students. One of my first thoughts as I watched these two teachers was that silence was not a classroom requirement. Ms. King told me “by giving them access to conversations--or what some teacher would call disruptions--then they don’t have disruptions because they live that sort of community.”

Neither teacher wasted instructional time. I observed these two teachers consistently fill their class time with relevant work. Ms. King walked in from the hall (where teachers often must be as classes change) and was talking about what the students should be doing or about the topic for the day before she was out of the doorway. Ms. King had a “problem of the day” on the board that students were expected to write down as soon as they were settled and before class began. She spent no time on it, although the problems were turned in as a part of the math notebook students kept. Ms. Andrews also commonly had a brief activity, like a topic for a haiku, on the board for students to get started on as soon as they were seated. She then immediately started, telling the kids her instructional time was important and not to waste it. Both also used going on with the lesson as a strategy to re-direct students who were off task. The students had to stop to listen or they would get behind.

Both teachers know their own actions act to escalate or diffuse a problem with a student, and both respected that kids need their space. Neither moved toward a student in confrontation (although Ms. King does move toward a student who is off task, often without ever addressing the student), and both know that students need to be able to “save face” in front of their peers. They explained that middle-school students value peer opinion and not embarrassing them in front of peers was critical to preventing aggressive behavior. For example, one way they helped students in front of peers was to re-direct by giving a task rather than addressing the behavior directly. Another method was to compliment both involved students and then re-direct the entire
class. To illustrate how teachers sometimes cause escalation of student aggression, Ms. King told a story of a student (so upset he was in tears) sent to her room to sit in her in-team suspension chair. She established the initial problem had escalated from him being out of his seat to blow his nose.

When…is the appropriate time to blow your nose? The kid needs to blow his nose! He gets out of his seat without permission, so he gets punched (a discipline procedure of “chances”), so he’s punched out, so then he gets angry…And they have a space issue. The teacher handed him his books and he grabbed them (because he is already angry). The teacher should have laid his books down.

Both teachers actively worked to understand what was important in the students’ lives and asked about students’ lives outside school and in other classes regularly. One morning an African American boy came to school with loose hair, and Ms. King allowed two girls to braid it for him during homeroom. She told me, “hair is really important.” Ms. Andrews knew the students’ neighborhoods and asked about their lives regularly.

Students often came to Ms. Andrews to share personal problems with her that they were having with peers, other teachers or at home, and she talked through problem solving strategies with them. Several times, I saw her call students aside after class to talk to them privately about inappropriate behavior that had not occurred in her classroom. She even warned students they would have to sit in silent lunch for her if their behavior in another class was bad. I heard her talk to a girl whose manner of dress had changed recently and whose clothes, according to Ms. Andrews, were no longer appropriate for school. Sometimes parents or guardians asked for her help. For example, one boy was not listening to his grandmother, whom he lives with because his father, who was a single parent, had committed suicide. She asked for Ms. Andrews help, and Ms. Andrews made him give her his fancy jewelry and spend extra periods in her room until
he was back on track at home. She told me he was wearing the jewelry to fit in with the wrong crowd and it was distracting him.

Both teachers believed what students told them, and students knew their word would be trusted. This trust allowed students to tell their side of a story, and the students did. For example, a student who had looked in another student’s backpack was listened to, and believed, when he claimed he did not remove anything from it. Ms. King told me she expected students to be honest and that she believed them when they explained themselves to her. I saw both teachers practice this several times. Students were given the opportunity to explain their actions, and it seemed that they were honest. There remains the possibility that students were not always honest, but the importance to the climate of the classroom of trusting students was greater than the importance of always hearing the truth.

Each teacher identified teasing as aggressive behavior in the initial interview and said she prevented teasing by creating a classroom in which one was safe to express oneself. The classrooms were safe places to talk, interact, be engaged, and move around but teasing or acting out was considered disrespectful of other students. Ms. Andrews explained that she talks to students about “internal and external conflict” and how to solve problems in her efforts to prevent teasing. She made clear to students her expectations of how they should treat each other, including not teasing, by reminding them of the rules, by enforcing the rules, and by helping students solve conflict when it occurred. She told me she often talked to students about how to solve problems both in and outside of class, and I also observed her do this many times. She explained to me that she told students at the beginning of the year of her expectations in her classroom. “We talk about it up front because I want them to know I enforce it. I tell them we will not make another person feel bad by what we say or what we write. Those are very
powerful tools…and I have to enforce that.” Similarly, Ms. King had students develop the rules, including rules of appropriate behavior toward each other, and explained to them why these rules must be enforced.

Neither teacher spent energy on mild complaining behavior from students such as sighing, rolling eyes, or making faces. They simply went on, sometimes literally turning a back on the students. The behavior got no attention and so students stopped themselves.

Ms. King and Ms. Andrews both complimented students for a great variety of successes, some academic, some personal, and some behavioral. They used positive reinforcement often and well. Ms. King praised groups, as well as individuals, daily. She gave compliments such as “you are the Duracell group.” Ms. Andrews also praised students in groups, and often expressed her pride in entire classes. Ms. King told students “that’s a very accelerated concept” and “you are so smart” and Ms. Andrews employed reading aloud what students had written to praise their writing skills. Negative reinforcement, such as taking away something like a chance (7th graders got four chances that are called “punches” before they missed free time on Friday) or getting to sit with friends at lunch (a common punishment in 8th grade) was used rarely and only after a warning had been given.

Both teachers treated the students in the same way that they treated adults. Occasionally adults came into the classroom to talk to one of the teachers. Neither teacher interrupted a student to talk to another adult. Ms. Andrews reminded students to be polite while she talked to the “visitor” but often the other adult was made to wait to talk to her because she was still busy with the students. Once during my observation in Ms. King’s classroom, the principal walked into the room to talk to her. She continued what she was doing with the students for several
minutes before she stopped to talk to him. The message that they were as important as he was could not have been clearer.

A common problem at the school was students not being prepared for class and many teachers complained about this problem in faculty and grade level meetings. It was clear to me that a large amount of time was spent on this issue in other classrooms. Neither of these teachers, however, made any issue of students not having supplies including paper or pencil. Students knew they just need to ask and these will be supplied. Not only was no classroom time wasted this way, but the anger a teacher might have about students being unprepared was completely eliminated. Both also had a procedure to give the students some responsibility for the supplies needed. Ms. King had students sign out a pencil (they might then keep it all day and, in fact, did not have to return it) and Ms. Andrews had students trade something of value (a shoe or a book) that they could have back when they gave the pencil back (whether at the end of class or later). Paper was always available. More valuable items that were borrowed were consistently returned. I saw supplies go and come regularly in these classrooms. Students were also not penalized in any way for “borrowing” supplies from each other. Ms. King considered a student’s need for supplies a basic need that the school should take care of. She knew that many students here might not have family support or the financial means to buy supplies needed for school. She said some teachers did not want to provide supplies because students take them.

They don’t steal, they need. There is a difference between stealing and needing. So I have stuff set up in the room for them to (borrow)…if they don’t have a calculator at home, they check one out. If they don’t have colored pencils, they check them out. So I think that they have an environment where it’s like a respectful arena of home. Where they can come in and use stuff. It’s their room.
In interviews the teachers defended the need to prevent disruptions before they became serious. I did not see serious behavior problems in either classroom, but the teachers did identify what they do to prevent major disruptions in class. Both teachers described preventing major disruptions by creating a classroom where respect was expected and where disrupting class was not tolerated. Ms. King had an additional strategy to avoid this kind of disruption that she called “sacrificing the lamb.” She added she always teaches this strategy to student teachers. She told me:

But a major disruption is multiple kids and so … you’ve got Maxi—Maxi is a severely emotionally behavior disordered kid and he’s going to yell at you. He’s going to get up screaming. He’s not going to leave…you just ignore Maxi’s behaviors for a minute, you pick a kid in the group that’s NOT going to yell back at you and you say ‘Walter, I’ve had enough of your behavior. Let’s go.’ As soon as you’ve taken Maxi, he says something smart to you, everybody’s going to laugh. Everybody’s going to laugh. And so then you’re going to have to take Maxi and then you’re going to have to take three kids that laugh. So then you have four kids in the hallway and then you’ve got everybody else in the classroom that is laughing. So they’re all laughing and talking about how you’ve totally lost control, and you’ve got four kids in the hallway that need to have some other place to go to now. And so you’ve lost it. That’s a major disruption. Now Walter gets up—I go and have a nice private conversation with Walter. You know, ‘Walter, you’re supposed to be a role model. This is not appropriate behavior. I understand that some of the people around you don’t have the same kind of behaviors that you can have.’ So Walter has this whole uplifting, private conversation—I’m not outside in the hall yelling at Walter, which is what I would have had to do if I had taken Maxi—because Maxi would have had to have the officer come and get him. That’s how it would have been. So then I say ‘Walter, I’m going to let you walk down the hallway, take two minutes.’… And so then, he comes back. I’ve already gone back (into the room). It’s like, he comes back to the room and everybody’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing, and Walter just sits down and goes back to work. It’s not that I re-enter the room with Walter and sit him down and re-direct him—no—I come back in, Walter got eliminated. No body else wants to leave the room.
During the initial interview, and then many other times when I spoke with her, Ms. King talked about how schools must create a sense of community. You “need a community of teachers and one where the police officer is trusted.” She believed that the entire school needed to be a safe place for students. She considered the prevention of aggression to be a school issue and thought that teachers should be trained to utilize effective strategies with students.

Similarly, Ms. Andrews discussed her belief that many teachers need to be taught strategies to prevent aggression effectively. She often talked about prevention in terms of what is not a discipline issue. For example, during a grade-level meeting Ms. Andrews talked to the other teachers about students not doing homework and said this was not a discipline issue to her. She told them, “I look at me. What am I not giving this child? Before I go to parents, I’ve tried several things.” Interestingly, Ms. King also identified homework as an issue where teachers are failing students. If supplies were needed to do homework successfully, then teachers should provide what was needed.

Mentoring was chosen by both teachers as a method to help other teachers. Ms. Andrews indicated that teachers need to support and teach each other, and several times while I observed her classroom other teachers came in to ask her advice on what to do about an aggressive or misbehaving student. Similarly, Ms. King often planned strategies to use with other teachers during lunch or planning periods. Ms. King distinguished between teachers who tried to help students manage their behavior, and just needed help doing so, and teachers who should not be teaching. Advantages she gave of team-teaching included providing needed help and identifying teachers who would not be helped. She expressed this in multiple ways but summarized: “And then some teachers just don’t like kids.”
To summarize, a classroom culture of respect and the assumptions of student competency were critical components of the strategy used by these extraordinary teachers to prevent aggressive behavior in the classroom. The classrooms of both teachers were comfortable places where students were permitted to meet their own needs including conversation and movement. The classroom was viewed as a place for students to work, not a place where students had to hold still and be quiet.

Respect of self and others was expected in these classrooms, and neither teacher tolerated student disrespect to teachers or to other students. Respect was talked about often in both classrooms. Teachers listened to students, asked about their lives outside of the classroom and the school, and smiled and laughed with them. Students were valuable people to these two teachers.

Students were treated in the same way as other adults in the school. Both teachers trusted students to tell them the truth, apologized to students for mistakes they made, and apologized if they had to interrupt a student (for example, to get another student on task). They also did not interrupt students when another adult came into the classroom.

Both teachers had high academic expectations of students and high expectations of student behavior and considered these to be related. Both called on many different students during a class period, praised students’ successes, and told students they were smart on a regular basis. Both began new topics by asking students what they already knew. They drew knowledge from students rather than just sharing their own knowledge. Both often talked to students about the importance of good behavior in and outside of the classroom.
How do extraordinary teachers intervene between students if aggressive behavior happens?

Because aggressive behavior was prevented so well by these two teachers in their classrooms, both discuss their intervention with students in terms of normal day-to-day monitoring. They also recalled times they had intervened in physical fights, but these fights occurred a relatively long time ago or happened in other areas of the school, such as the hall or lunchroom. Very serious acting out toward them by students had been experienced by both, but not often. Both felt their reaction to this aggressive behavior toward them, which was immediate and strong, had worked to prevent further problems.

Both thought teachers should stop immediately any teasing or other inappropriate behavior that does occur between students, and although I heard very little teasing in these two classrooms, they did so consistently when teasing did happen. Almost all of the teasing that occurred was across gender, and often humor about student need to show off for each other was used to diffuse conflict. Ms. Andrews told one boy “she wouldn’t do that if she didn’t like you.” Occasional student teasing when work was shared by others was always stopped with disagreement and some indication that the teacher thought the work was very good.

Each teacher stopped teasing by disagreeing with the teaser and supporting the victim. Ms. King told one girl, “I know she’s smart, I grade the papers,” and Ms. Andrews told another, “Don’t do him like that. These are legitimate questions. These are good questions. My other classes didn’t ask these questions.” The teachers also stopped students who were impolite to one another. Ms. Andrews stopped a boy from talking while another student was talking by saying, “Martin is disrespecting you. Martin, we talked about this the other day.”
Sometimes discipline for multiple students was needed, but here the teachers differed. Both teachers did express that consequences must be immediate and fair, but Ms. King demonstrated that she did not believe in group discipline. Interestingly, Ms. Andrews sometimes did use group punishment. For example, the whole class might be required to miss the treat of eating lunch in the classroom when a few students in that class could not remain on task. This was one of the few differences observed in the way the two teachers managed their classrooms.

Both teachers stated that consequences for aggressive behavior, and other disruptive behavior should be logical. Ms. King consistently employed logical consequences for students such as losing a chair when not using it properly or moving to another pod to work if a student could not work properly with those in his or her pod. Students trusted her to make “consequences” (she never talks of punishment, only consequences) that were fair. They were even permitted to negotiate consequences. Ms. Andrews also used logical consequences such as having to move when unable to work properly with another person, although her consequences were less negotiable.

Neither teacher allowed students to argue, nor did either get angry or yell at students. There was little arguing in Ms. King’s room, but when it happened, Ms. King remained unemotional but serious. She interrupted students who tried to argue and just told them what she wanted done, leaving no time for them to answer her. On several occasions, Ms. Andrews repeated what she has already said to an angry student, stating what happened to “create the current situation.” She then went on with her teaching to discontinue the “conversation” with the child who wanted to argue. For example, a student frustrated for being given a silent lunch (where a student cannot sit with friends at lunch) was told exactly why the punishment had been given, was told she could talk to her after class, and was then essentially ignored as Ms. Andrews
continued to teach. The opportunity to argue was taken away. The student was then given a chance to discuss the problem later, after he or she was calmer and peers had left the classroom.

Ms. King’s reputation for being strict was well known in the building, and so students she did not even know moved to do what they were supposed to be doing when she was present. One day during school-wide end of year testing, Ms. King had her class outside for a little free time. It was a pretty day and the adults stood in different areas talking as the students played basketball and walked in groups talking. The in-school suspension trailer was near, and students were looking out of the windows of the trailer. Students are supposed to be seated and working in the trailer, and Ms. King went to check on these students. Although both teaching assistants were present, the students were all out of their desks and some of the boys had put another boy up-side-down into the trash can! As Ms. King stood in the doorway, the students scrambled to get back into their seats, and the boy righted himself and also returned to his seat. She left without saying a word.

Ms. Andrews was also respected throughout the building. She only needed to walk across the hall when another class was too loud, and the entire class would grow silent. A substitute teacher was having trouble keeping a class under control, and Ms. Andrews told them that if she heard them, she would come back and “you will all have silent lunch.” The class remained quiet after she left.

Both teachers took students into their classrooms to sit in their in-team seats. As explained previously, these seats were set aside for students who misbehaved in other classrooms on the same academic team of four or five classrooms. However, these seats were often used by students who were not on the team, because neither teacher wanted students to have to spend time in the in-school suspension classroom and because teachers on other teams sometimes sent
aggressive students to them because the students would not create problems in their classrooms. The in-school suspension classroom, out in a trailer, was set aside for students who had been suspended. While in their classrooms, the extraordinary teachers monitored the suspended students’ school-work, although often the students were not at the same grade level. They knew students did not get school work done while in the in-school suspension trailer.

Both teachers had to address serious disruptions in the past by removing the student and talking to them. Each described the class afterward as a calmer place. “But once he was out, and the kids saw me stand up to him, I could conduct the class,” said Ms. Andrews.

Ms. King has not had a physical fight in her classroom for many years, but she has interfered in a number of fights in the hall, in the lunchroom, or in other teacher’s classrooms. She repeated clear instructions of what she wanted the students to do. For example, she repeated, “nobody move, everybody wait,” as two students were circling each other preparing to fight. She describes breaking up fights this way:

I walk between students—and they are coming at each other—I’ve had students with chairs, even—and I step in the middle with my hands like this (out straight in front of her) and I’m screaming the whole time “You need to move away. Move against the wall. Move against the wall now. Move to the left.” And so, I’m like this (arms still straight out, then spreads them to spread kids apart). And then I take the one that’s less aggressive, and I push them away (by spreading arms out)—they have to be moved. And then I walk over and take the other one—now, I’m not touching them—I never touch them because they’re angry and you don’t know---if it’s a kid that I know and I have a relationship with, I can even grasp them.

She talked about the fear some teachers have of liability if they intervene physically and also indicated times that teachers had gotten hurt when they tried to get between two fighting students, yet she said teachers need to stop fights if they happen. Her priority was keeping the students safe.
Similarly, Ms. Andrews rarely had physical fights in her classroom, although she did have one in her classroom at the beginning of this year. She described it as due to one student with special needs being pushed a little too far by another student, and added that she was sorry that she had not heard what was happening so she could intervene more quickly. As the two started to hit each other (she said they were not using fists or really hurting each other), she was able to tell the other children in the classroom that their own behavior could affect the outcome of a fight. She warned them “If a fight ensues and you instigate it or you do anything to keep it going, I’m going to give you the same punishment I give them.” She had them ignore the fight and get back to work. She described this as being very surprising to the students in the class. Ms. Andrews was not physically able to get between two fighting students, but she called one of the boys to her and he stopped and came to her. She explained to the boys calmly that they had “interrupted her class and broken her rule.” The two boys were calming down by the time the officer, who had been called by intercom, got to the room. She did not, however, send the boys to the office with him but handled punishment herself.

Both teachers talked to students about the consequences of fighting or of letting friends fight. Ms. King believed that adults did a disservice to students if they did not help them understand that behaviors for which they were sent home from school could get them arrested outside of school. Ms. Andrews told several boys who had gotten into a fight in the gymnasium that a fight outside of school would have different, more severe, consequences if it happened somewhere else.

During the time I spent with these two teachers, a loaded gun was brought to school by a student. The gun was shown to other students during first period in a classroom across from Ms. Andrews and then given to another student who put it in his backpack. No student told a teacher
about the gun until second period. Ms. Andrews had a long talk with her class that afternoon about needing to tell adults when there is a problem. “It’s not snitching. You have to be mature,” she told them. She included other forms of problem and aggressive behaviors as she talked about the difference between tattling, which is to get attention or deliberately get others in trouble, and reporting, which is to bring about a safer community for everyone.

To summarize, both extraordinary teachers handle problems that happen immediately and in the classroom, without threatening outside enforcement. Neither called the officer to help when they intervened between students or when students got angry. Both explained the punishment being imposed and talked to students about consequences of one’s own actions. Also, both regularly gave warnings and second chances before any punishments were given. Punishment was, therefore, often not needed. The word “punishment” was not used in these classrooms, however. Both teachers spoke of “consequences.” Lack of respect in the classroom, if it occurred, was addressed right away and consistently.

In addition, neither teacher got angry or lost her temper with students. I spent many different types of days with these teachers, including stressful days of standardized testing, field trips, conducting experiments with science projects outside, cooking a large meal in the classroom, and even the last day of school. The teachers always remained positive. Both teachers got very serious at times, but both addressed student behavior rather than becoming angry with individual students. Both teachers specifically talked to students about the consequences of violent behavior. Inappropriate language, including racial slurs, fighting and gun carrying were discussed in both classrooms. Choosing not to do what peers do was frequently discussed. Each teacher could raise her voice to be heard over many students, but
neither ever yelled at a student in anger. Neither teacher engaged in an argument with a student, even when students tried, with great tenacity, to argue.

These teachers described their efforts at intervention in terms of how they prevented aggressive behavior. Many discipline problems in the classroom were avoided when the teachers did not consider lack of preparation for class to be a discipline problem. Supplies that were needed were provided, or else getting supplies from another student was facilitated. The teachers also did not consider not doing homework to be a discipline issue but rather an academic issue. Both approached this lack of preparation by questioning how they could facilitate homework completion.

The teachers advised other teachers about managing student behavior, particularly aggressive behavior. They sometimes walked over to other classrooms to help if it seemed to be needed. They consulted with teachers individually and in grade level meetings, particularly about students that were shared among them.

**In their efforts to reduce aggressive behavior, how do extraordinary teachers account for cultural differences?**

Although both teachers talked about the need to consider cultural differences in their work to prevent conflict and to best educate students, both demonstrated how to consider cultural differences far more powerfully. Each provided a classroom that is a safe place to be who you are and used culturally relevant teaching practices with her students.

Ms. Andrews, who is African-American, was told at her predominately Caucasian college that she would need to learn the background of her future Caucasian students. However, she reflected on the inconsistency of requirements for Caucasian teachers who were not taught about the background of African-American children, nor were they advised to work to understand
children who were not White. She identified this as a piece that was missing in teacher education. She described the need to understand African-American children in this way:

        See, I see a lot of that. Instead of knowing the child, they tend to think that the child is being deprived of something just because they are not from their particular background. It’s not true. And you’ve got to know them. You’ve got to know where they are coming from and not try to remove them from their setting and bring them into yours because it’s not a point of changing their culture. You’re trying to teach them a concept. At the same time, be aware as to why that child may act the way they do. African-American kids are social. Very social. And so five minutes, I don’t go past the five minutes, I allow them to talk. Because they want to know what happened across the street this past weekend and they want to inform me of what happened (to someone) over the weekend.

        Ms. King recognized schools, not just colleges of education, do not respect the background of African American and Hispanic children. She viewed this as more than omission and labeled it oppression.

        We (schools) perpetuate the oppression of minority groups just holistically. You know, ALL of our special ed. kids are Black, ALL of our gifted kids are White, ALL of our kids on free and reduced lunch are black and Latino, ALL of the kids who bring their lunch are White. Not that (brief pause) that’s socio-demographics, I understand that.

        Ms. Andrews said she talks to African-American children about Latino children and differences in culture. She explained that she stopped them from saying, “that Mexican kid” and had them call each other by name. She asked students to think about how they would feel if someone talked about them the way they were talking. She related that she sees conflict between the African-American children and Latino children, and she believed it was due to the special attention given to Latino children that was once given to African-American children. She felt African-American and Caucasian students get along well at this school, but she was concerned about stereotypes African American students have about Latinos.
Ms. King also stopped students when she perceived any cultural or racial conflict. For example, she intervened when an African-American boy said a picture “looked Hispanic.” She explained to him and his pod (his working group) about stereotypes, although she did not use this word.

Both teachers had strong feelings that the school needed to meet the needs of the students rather than the students needed to conform to the school culture. Ms. Andrews said:

We have to create an environment they can handle. I’m not sure that every teacher is willing to give that to a child or to allow that for a child.

(Speaking as the child) Let me do something I’m comfortable with, set the environment that I’m comfortable in whether or not I’m highly intellectual or I am struggling. You’ve got to understand me to be able to teach me.

I think sometimes we don’t. We think all children will behave and act and learn the same way and in actuality I don’t think that’s right.

Ms. King said:

And the bottom line is, I think, the vast majority (of teachers) choose not to learn how to make the best situation in their class for their kids. They choose to make the best situation in the class for themselves. I went to this multi-cultural initiative meeting and there is this instructional lead teacher from another school, and he is the instructional LEAD (her emphasis) teacher at the other school, and he says ‘We just need to teach these kids to be able to do what’s expected in the school building.’ And I said ‘What are you saying? Are you saying that the kids need to change for the school building? Or that the school building needs to change for the kids because what I’M (her emphasis) saying is the school building is going to meet the needs of the kids and not the reverse. We cannot change their community. We cannot change their home life. We cannot change their socio-demographic situation and, if we choose to try that, we’re choosing to try to change who they are and what they are about and they are going to revolt against that and that’s why we have a 50% drop-out rate.’ And so he, of course, is offended.
In addition to encouraging students to accept others regardless of difference, both teachers practice collaborative learning in the classroom. Ms. King had her students work in “pods,” her name for desks grouped together facing each other. Ms. Andrews structured time for students to move desks together to share work and help each other or to move their desks around hers when she told stories.

These two teachers consistently drew information from students and then expanded upon the knowledge students already had. Ms. King began geometry by asking what students remembered from last year, and she praised what they already knew. When they got to the topic where she wanted to be, she went on with what they remembered about the concept. She also used students’ examples to illustrate. For example, when learning about arcs and rays, one boy knew the sun had rays, and she worked with this to show that a sun’s ray was the same as a ray in geometry. In the same way, Ms. Andrews had the students to tell her how to write a haiku, and she used the poems they made about their life, including talk of gangs, to illustrate a correct haiku.

Examples used in these classrooms to describe a concept are culturally diverse and inclusive. In Ms. Andrews’ class a discussion of a book led to a political discussion about war, specifically moving in and taking over. She allowed the students to give opinions and then asked them to support their opinions. Current events in Iraq were interwoven with the events of the novel. The students accepted and listened (my emphasis) to other ideas as they discussed. Ms. Andrews then gave an example of the devastation of the people in Africa: “They were rich in culture, and now they are all messed up.” The students used this example to continue their discussion. Similarly, Ms. King described a neighborhood in an example that matched the
neighborhood many of her students lived in. Hypothetical shopping trips included foods that matched the foods eaten by her students.

Both used the students’ words as they talked to them and tied the concepts they are learning back to their daily lives. For example, Ms. King explained why angles were important when one is driving and Ms. Andrews told of times students would need to be able to write well in the future.

Both teachers worked actively to understand Latino culture and to talk to Latino kids about their culture. They both tried to learn Spanish words, asked Latino students to teach them Spanish words, and then often spoke the Spanish words they had learned. Both also gave Latino students time to translate for each other in Spanish if something was not understood in English. Even when the teachers disagreed in some way with a cultural norm of the students, they accepted cultural differences. Gaps in understanding were reduced with good communication with students. For example, a Latino girl came to Ms. Andrews to complain about another teacher not liking the girl’s boyfriend. Ms. Andrews understood there was another issue and talked with the student long enough to learn the boyfriend was 19 years old. The student was 13 years old. Ms. Andrews discriminated between disapproval of the age difference and disapproval of the boyfriend. The girl worked to explain that the age difference was not considered a problem in her culture. Although Ms. Andrews did not agree that the age difference was acceptable, she did help the student understand that the other teacher was only looking out for her.

In this case, the race of the teacher did not influence the use of culturally relevant strategies. Both teachers deliberately used culturally relevant strategies to improve learning and to prevent aggression. Ms. Andrews, who was African American, knew and understood her
African American students. Ms. King, who was Caucasian, was specifically interested in teaching African American children and had studied the education of African Americans extensively. She explained her use of culturally relevant teaching strategies in terms of her interest in meeting the needs of African American students.

In summary, accounting for cultural differences of students was a critical component of the teachers’ efforts to prevent aggressive behavior. Methods used included understanding and not judging students’ backgrounds, not viewing home environment as deficient, utilizing collaborative learning in the classroom, drawing knowledge from students, and including culturally rich and diverse examples in the content of the courses. A classroom climate that encouraged respect of all learners, and in which students were treated with respect, was the primary strategy used to prevent student aggressive behavior.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to describe the strategies used by school teachers who are extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom. In this chapter, I discuss the importance of the findings, highlight the strengths and limitations, and make recommendations for further research.

Discussion

The two teachers identified as extraordinary at preventing aggressive behavior in the classroom were, in fact, extraordinary. Both were “really good,” as the school principal described them, at managing classroom behavior and at creating a positive classroom climate. Although their teaching styles and discipline procedures were quite different, their classrooms looked and felt remarkably similar. The students in both classrooms were comfortable, remained on task, and got along with each other well. Very few aggressive behaviors were observed in either classroom because of the teachers’ skill at preventing them.

The results of the study are organized into five major conclusions: 1. most student aggression can be prevented, 2. a positive classroom climate was the strongest indicator for the prevention of aggression, 3. teachers used culturally relevant strategies in their efforts to prevent aggression, 4. intervention was swift and solution-focused, and 5. the teachers believed that the strategies they used can be learned by other teachers. Each of these conclusions is explained, and indicators for each are discussed.
The first major conclusion of this study is that most student aggressive behavior can be prevented. The teachers prevented almost all aggressive behavior, and minor aggressive behavior such as teasing was not permitted to escalate. Physical aggression was never observed in these classrooms. Prevention was not dependent on teacher personality but instead on the strategies used by the teacher in the classroom. The teachers differed substantially in personality, yet prevention of student aggression did not differ.

Students who were aggressive in other teachers’ classrooms were not aggressive in these teachers’ classrooms. The teachers began working immediately as class began, and students came into the classroom and got to work. Students who were highly aggressive in other school environments, including the student who brought a loaded gun to school, remained engaged and on task in these classrooms. Environment is known to be related to aggressive behavior, meaning people act aggressively in certain environments or situations but not in others (Bandura, 1986). Student behavior was determined to a large extent by the environment in this case, and students did not act aggressively in these classrooms.

A second major conclusion was that a positive classroom climate was the strongest indicator for prevention of aggression. The teachers defined aggressive behavior, and identified their effort to prevent aggressive behavior, in terms of how they constructed classroom climate, and a positive climate was deliberately created by the teachers as a strategy to prevent student aggression and to increase student learning. These classrooms were peaceful and safe places where positive relationships were expected. Brophy & McCaslin (1992) describe positive classroom climate as constructed by authoritative teachers who are warm and supportive, as well as firm. Additionally, these (authoritative) teachers encourage supportive peer relationships, as did the two teachers described in this study. Vessels (1998) described classroom climate as the
“personality” of the classroom. Creation of positive classroom climate where the learning environment is “more humane” has been recommended as a way to counter aggressive behavior in schools (Noguera, 1995). Although these and other authors have emphasized the importance of classroom climate, few have operationalized how this climate is attained. A strength of this study is that it provided numerous examples of specific skills and strategies used by these teachers to create a positive climate, as summarized below.

The teachers emphasized the need to create a classroom climate in which all students were important. The teachers regularly asked students about their lives, concerns, opinions, and feelings. Additionally, students were trusted by teachers to explain their behavior honestly. Teachers did not permit students be disrespectful to them, to other teachers, to other students, or to themselves. In both classrooms, teachers had extensive conversations with students about respecting self and others and about the consequences of disrespect. The message that aggressive behavior would not be tolerated was clear to students.

Positive strategies such as fostering decision-making and problem-solving were used regularly in these classrooms. These strategies have been recommended to create a positive classroom climate and to achieve student self-discipline, and positive climate and classroom management strategies have been found to reduce student behavior problems (Bear, 1998). The teachers engaged with their students rather than controlled them. Positive strategies are also associated with student feeling of being connected to the school, and students who feel connected to school--along with feeling motivated to do well at school--are less likely to be aggressive (McNeely et al., 2002; Fors, Crepaz, & Hayes, 1999; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Low school involvement has been identified as a school factor related to aggressive behavior (Mayer, 1995). Resnick et al. (1997) describe this connection to school as school-connectedness, which
includes a sense that teachers care for students and have high expectations for student performance.

Each teacher considered prevention of aggression to be related to challenging students academically and maintaining high expectations. Both spoke of the importance of relating lessons to the students to their efforts at classroom management. Engaged students did not have time for disruptive behavior. In a classic study of teacher effectiveness, Kounin (1970) found that teachers who were effective at preventing discipline problems were those who motivated students and maintained their attention. Ladson-Billings (2001) believed that the failure of teachers to meet the needs of individual students (“to teach”) is the major cause of student academic failure. High teacher expectation has been associated with improved academic achievement (Bloom et al., 2001). In this study, the teachers had very high expectations of students’ academic work and both articulated that it was their responsibility to challenge each student. The students rose to meet these expectations.

The teachers had high expectations for student behavior in addition to high academic expectations. At the beginning of the school year, each clearly outlined their expectations for student behavior in the classroom. It was made clear that aggressive behavior, teasing, and the making of racial slurs would not be accepted. Students helped develop the classroom rules and therefore felt some ownership of classroom expectations for behavior.

The second major indicator for prevention of aggression was teacher respect of students. Importantly, both teachers treated students with the same respect that they had for adults. Teachers spoke and listened to students in the same way as they communicated with other adults at the school. Teachers did not interrupt students so that adults could speak, and teachers never spoke down to students.
The teachers further demonstrated respect of students by recognizing students’ needs and permitting students to meet these needs in the classroom, much as adults are able to meet their own needs while at work. The teachers did not require students to remain seated and quiet in the classroom. Students needed permission to leave the room, but permission to get up was usually not needed. Students did not raise hands to ask to blow a nose, sharpen a pencil, or throw away trash. They also did not ask permission to walk to another desk to see what another student or group of students were doing or to help another student.

Both teachers provided supplies that students needed to be successful in the classroom. Potential conflict between students and the teachers was avoided entirely when the teachers did not punish students for not having school supplies, and therefore for being unprepared for class. This strategy prevented the wasting of instructional time and any conflict that might result from punishment and resulting student frustration. Providing what students needed also prevented the implicit message that students without supplies were lacking in some way, including family support. Interestingly, providing supplies created the most controversy among other teachers at the school when strategies for effective classroom management were discussed at a workshop held during a teacher planning day during the 2003-2004 school-year. Other teachers believed that students should be prepared with paper, pencil, and other needed supplies each day and were frustrated by the suggestion that they ignore this lack of preparation.

Strongly related to positive climate and maintaining respect, a third major conclusion of this study is that the teachers used culturally responsive teaching as a strategy to prevent aggressive behavior. Collaborative learning, drawing knowledge from students, and using relevant, culturally diverse examples in curricula are recommended for diverse learners, specifically African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and were used consistently by
both teachers. A majority of students in these classrooms were African-American, and teaching without accounting for racial and cultural diversity might have acted as a barrier to learning for these students (Saldana & Waxman, 1997). Lack of inclusion may be related to frustration for diverse learners and to a feeling that what they are taught at school does not match their home culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This frustration not only affects learning but student behavior. Respecting and validating students is recommended to prevent problem behavior in the classroom (Ward, 1998).

In addition to using culturally relevant teaching methods, neither teacher blamed the home for problems students had. Characteristics of the family and other factors beyond the school were treated as information about students that adults at school need to understand and work with. Both talked comfortably with students about their neighborhoods and families and worked to remain aware of what was going on in the students’ lives. The culture of African-American and Latino students was not viewed by these teachers as a mismatch with the culture of the school (Ogbu, 1974), but rather an important part of who the students were. In the opinion of these teachers, any cultural mismatch between school and home should be addressed by changes at school, rather than by labeling the home as deficient. Although behavior at school is influenced by home life, and extreme cases do occur where mismatch might be very great, these teachers believed that teachers, and consequently schools, must work to meet the educational needs of all students without judging the student for his or her circumstances outside of school.

The fourth major conclusion of the study is that intervention, which was solution-focused and immediate, prevented the escalation of aggressive behavior. When a problem happened, both teachers addressed it immediately. Verbal aggression was stopped quickly, almost always before another student could respond. Respect of others was enforced in these situations and, in
consequence, student aggression never escalated past teasing of other students or attempts to argue with the teacher. A primary factor in effective prevention of discipline problems is handling any problems that do occur immediately, before they become more serious (Kounin, 1970). Research on effective teacher action to control student behavior largely focuses on the relationship between academic success of students and discipline methods used in the classroom. However, research on teacher academic effectiveness demonstrates that proactive classroom management reduces disruption and increases student learning (Bear, 1998).

The teachers regularly talked to students about the possible consequences of aggressive or violent behaviors like teasing, fighting, gang membership, and weapon carrying. Consequences for any type of aggressive behavior, when called for, were often negotiated with students and were logical. These teachers worked to solve problems with students rather than just punishing inappropriate behavior. They focused on solutions when aggressive behavior occurred rather than on punishment, a strategy that is increasingly recommended (Nelson et al., 2000; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992). Also, both teachers explained how consequences for aggressive behavior outside of school differ from at those at school, as consequences outside of school are usually more serious and not changeable.

The teachers always discussed “the problem” rather than giving ultimatums. Both teachers gave warnings before disruptions were serious and gave second chances after a disruption. Students were given the opportunity to correct problem behavior prior to any teacher-initiated correction. These teachers used strategies similar to those proposed by restorative justice (McCold, 2003), in which the class is structured to provide high levels of control and support and in which students are involved in deciding consequences, although they did not identify the strategy by this terminology. Rather than punishing students, they equipped
them with skills to act effectively in social situations, a strategy suggested by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). This authoritative teaching style allows short-term management of aggressive behavior at the same time that decision-making skills and social problem-solving strategies are encouraged (Bear, 1998). Because the teachers handled problems in the classroom with the students, they did not request assistance from the school resource officer or send students to the office.

As a part of their intervention discussions with students, both teachers emphasized the importance of reporting to an adult when problems occurred and distinguished reporting from “tattling” or “telling.” Students are not likely to report unless they feel they are safe and that a reasonable response will be made by adults as a result of reporting (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Also, encouraging student reporting of aggressive behavior is often difficult when the culture of schools promotes not “telling” on other children (Eslea & Smith, 1998). The teachers worked to reassure students that they would act appropriately when students reported and that reporting was the right action to take. Although students were encouraged to solve problems and develop self-discipline, both teachers explained to students that sometimes adults needed to intervene.

A respectful classroom climate, in addition to preventing student aggression, was also an important component of intervention. Teasing was not permitted in these classrooms and, if it occurred, both teachers talked to students about what was said rather than just stopping them. Respect of others was emphasized. Teasing is sometimes a form of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001; Glover et al., 2000) and so was treated seriously by the teachers.

Respect of other cultures was specifically discussed by the teachers when inappropriate comments were made concerning culture or race. Intervention was immediate and included the entire class. Although the word racism was not used, racism was specifically addressed by the
teachers. Both explained why comments with racial overtones were inappropriate and then related this back to how students might feel if this kind of comment was made about them.

When intervention for any type of aggressive behavior was necessary, both teachers stayed calm and worked to calm students if they were angry. Little is written about teacher anger and escalation in relation to prevention of aggression. However the cultural diversity literature has examined negative teacher attitude of students, particularly African-American or low socio-economic students, and the relationship of such affect to escalation of discipline problems in the classroom (see Ladson-Billings, 2001; 1994; Ogbu et al., 1996).

Interestingly, neither teacher spent energy on very mild disruptive behavior that was not aggressive, such as sighing or eye rolling. Instead, they continued on with the lesson. Students stopped this type of mild behavior problem when the teacher did not pay attention to it. Ignoring minor disruptive behavior served to prevent escalation between the teachers and the students. It also showed respect of the student’s right to be unhappy, as long as the unhappiness did not interfere with the class.

A fifth major conclusion of the study is that both teachers felt strongly that these strategies to prevent aggressive behavior, and to intervene effectively, can be learned. As stated previously, strategies used by these teachers—such as creating a positive classroom climate and providing academic challenge—does not differ from what has been described in the literature (Bear, 1998; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992), but specific strategies for teachers remain largely absent in the aggression literature, and these are needed for teacher training. Most recommendations are vague and suggest a change in the way classrooms are managed or in the way teachers view children.
These teachers believed that effective classroom management is an important part of being a good teacher, and that positive classroom management requires effort. A change in the way teachers relate to children is a difficult task without a time and administrative support (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Improving teachers’ skills, however, is possible. Enhancing teachers’ abilities and skills may be the only way to help teachers change the way they view students (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

The teachers believed that for teacher training to be successful, change must be supported by the administration. Administrative support is needed to allow time to for teachers to observe each other and to meet and talk together. The teachers also felt that administrative support is required to allow teachers to feel safe to try new strategies with students.

In this case, both teachers believed that pre-service and in-service classroom teachers may benefit from classroom management training, and that teachers are capable of enhancing their classroom management skills in positive ways without having to “learn it on the job.” They suggested teachers need the opportunity to formally communicate with each other often in grade level meetings. The teachers felt that regular time set aside to share strategies for managing student behavior and strategies to best meet the academic needs of individual students was needed and could provide the opportunity to discuss aggressive students and share suggestions on prevention and intervention in a way that is not threatening. They believed teachers can support and teach each other. Teacher support groups do provide reinforcement for applying new skills to prevent aggression and to help solve problems (Orpinas, Horne, & MVPP, 2004; Olweus, 1993). New skills are learnable. Peer coaching, a support group model, has been shown to be related to reduced teacher isolation and increased positive attitude toward
professional growth (Phillips & Glickman, 1991), and to implementation of new procedures by teachers (Kohler, Crilley & Good, 1997).

The teachers also thought mentoring was an effective method for practicing teachers to see and try-out new strategies and to support each other. Time set aside to observe other teachers, to see how others managed their classrooms, and to share effective strategies with each other was believed to be another effective way for teachers to help each other to learn to prevent aggressive behavior. Modeling of effective behavior can also be accomplished in this way. Both teachers believed that teachers need to know students, and such knowledge contributed to student behavioral and academic success in the classroom. They worked to understand their own students, and they felt opportunities for teachers to share information and mentor each other would allow other teachers to do the same.

These two teachers prevented disruptive and aggressive behavior in their own classrooms, but they also were interested in positive school climate and the prevention of aggression throughout the school. They talked often to other teachers about students’ behavior and strategies they used with students. Both spoke up in grade level teacher meetings and faculty meetings to share classroom management strategies that worked for them. They also demonstrated what worked with their own classes around other teachers. Both encouraged other teachers to examine what they, rather than the students, were doing when students were not meeting expectations.

**Strengths and Limitations**

A major strength of this study is the in-depth study of teachers on multiple occasions. The strength of this type of in-depth understanding of the teachers’ skills, and in being able to describe the different strategies they used, would not have been possible with a large sample.
Studying two teachers rather than one teacher allowed discrimination between personality of teacher and the commonly used strategies to prevent aggressive behavior. Two very different teachers used the same strategies to prevent aggression. In addition, the strategies identified by this study are supported by what is found in the literature. The limitation is that I studied two teachers at one school. It would be useful to study other teachers and in other school settings.

Another strength of the study was the variety of days and months spent with the teachers. Observations and interviews were conducted on different days of the week over a period of almost three months. The limitation is that the study was conducted entirely in the second semester of school, which may differ from the first semester. Although aggressive behaviors related to testing limits are generally more common at the end of the school year, in this case teachers stated that aggressive behavior was reduced over the course of the school year. The teachers believed this was due to the removal of the most aggressive students from the school. These more aggressive students were finishing the school year at an alternative school, where students are placed when expelled from their regular school, or were incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility. Generally, they had displayed serious aggressive behavior like bringing a weapon to school or other problem behavior such as drug use at school.

Development of a complete picture of the climate of the school was another strength of this study. The time spent in other areas of the school helped inform how students acted with other teachers. Attending school improvement committee meetings, and helping to develop the school improvement plan, provided a global picture of both cultural diversity and problem behavior issues at the school level. Attending faculty meetings, particularly those that lasted all day to work on the school improvement plan, and grade level meetings allowed time to work with other teachers in the school and to hear some of their concerns.
Recommendations and Conclusions

More studies, both qualitative and quantitative are indicated. Further qualitative study of teachers who differ by gender or by length of time teaching would be useful to confirm that other effective teachers use the identified strategies. Studying teachers of students from different grade levels to compare strategies by age level would be useful, although middle school is generally the age with the highest levels of student aggressive behavior. Qualitative study would also be useful to transform the knowledge of how to construct a positive classroom climate and prevent aggression into in-service and pre-service teacher training. Further quantitative study to examine the impact of the use of the suggested strategies on student academic achievement, disciplinary referrals, and student aggressive behaviors would allow evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies and best training practices. Evidence-based research is needed in education, as The No Child Left Behind Act stipulates federal funds should support programs and strategies backed by research of effectiveness.

There was much conversation among other teachers at the school about appropriate times to punish unprepared students. It would be useful to study student preparation, or lack of such, as a discipline issue related to aggressive behavior. This indicator could be included in a larger quantitative study, as suggested above, or alone in a smaller study to examine its importance separately from the other suggested strategies.

More research is also needed to examine the effectiveness of culturally relevant teaching in the prevention of school aggression and violence. In this case, classroom climate that was culturally responsive was a chosen strategy to prevent student aggressive behavior. The bodies of literature for diversity education and prevention of school violence remain quite independent, yet much may be gained by merging the expertise and knowledge held in these two areas.
In conclusion, the teachers studied were, in fact, very effective at preventing student aggressive behavior. The strategies identified to prevent student aggression were common between the teachers, and a positive classroom climate was the strongest indicator for the prevention of aggression. Respect of students was an important component of positive classroom climate, and culturally relevant strategies were considered essential to prevent aggression and improve learning. When aggressive behaviors did happen, intervention was swift and solution-focused. Additionally, the teachers believed that the strategies they used can be learned by other teachers.

Although many teachers do have good relationships with students, teachers are faced with many challenges and often need support in their efforts to manage student behavior. It was exciting to see that these two teachers, as different as they were, were truly extraordinary at creating a classroom climate where aggression was not tolerated and that they used the same strategies to accomplish this. Separating strategy from personality was exciting work, and identifying strategies as they became clearer and were repeated was very rewarding. It was a pleasure to work with these teachers and uplifting to me to witness and document the wonderful job they did in the classroom.
REFERENCES


Counseling Psychologist, 21(2), 240-243.


APPENDICES
A: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

I agree to take part in a study titled “Preventing aggression in the classroom: a case study of extraordinary teachers”, being conducted by Ms. Katie Darby Hein (542-4358) from the Health Promotion and Behavior Department at the University of Georgia (UGA) under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Orpinas (542-4370), also at UGA. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I can ask to have the information collected returned to me or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- The purpose of the study is to describe extraordinary elementary school teachers and the strategies they use to prevent aggressive behavior.
- Extraordinary teachers have skills that may be identifiable and may be learned. Ms. Hein hopes to identify skills that could be taught to others.
- This study involves multiple interviews with Ms. Hein including an initial structured interview of one hour and 14 other weekly informal interviews. The interviews will be recorded to ensure accuracy. I will be allowed to read the transcripts and make corrections, additions, or deletions.
- This study involves 14 weekly classroom observations of my classroom by Ms. Hein, and she will be taking field notes about what she observes. She and I will be able to discuss notes from the observations and I will be able to make corrections, additions, or deletions.
- The research is not expected to cause any harm or discomfort, either for me or for my students.
- All information collected will be held confidential unless otherwise required by law. Pseudonyms will be used, and I will not be identified by name or by school unless I choose to be.
- Ms. Hein will answer any questions I have about the research project and may be reached by telephone at 542-4358. I may also contact the professor supervising the research, Dr. Pamela Orpinas, at 542-4370.

Signature of researcher/date  Signature of participant/date

Research at the University of Georgia that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your right as a participant should be addressed to Ms. Christina Josef, Coordinator, Human Subject Office, Institutional Review Board, Office of V.P. for Research, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, (706) 542-6514, e-mail address IRB@uga.edu.
B: INTERVIEW PREAMBLE

Each of the two structured initial interviews will begin with the following statement:

As you know, I am interviewing and spending time with extraordinary teachers. You have been identified and chosen for this study because of your effectiveness at
1. preventing aggression in your classroom, 2. recognizing when intervention between students is needed, and 3. intervening in a meaningful and helpful way. I would like to ask you about your successes and how you learned what works.

Your responses to the questions today, and in future interviews, will remain confidential. You will not be identified in the final report unless you choose to be, and I will use a pseudonym for you when I refer to you if you so choose. The observation protocols will also remain confidential. Pseudonyms will also be used in the final report when I describe your students.

You will be given an opportunity to review the interview transcripts and classroom observation field notes, and you will be able to make any corrections, additions, or deletions from the transcripts and from the classroom observations that you wish. If you have any questions about why I am asking something, or if you feel uncomfortable with a question, please let me know. I would like to tape record this and future interviews so that I don’t miss anything. I am afraid that if I rely just on my notes, I may miss something you say, or I might inadvertently misquote you. If at any time you would like me to turn the recorder off, just say so, or feel free to reach over to turn it off yourself. Before we begin, do you have any questions? Do you have a preferred pseudonym you would like me to use?