

Exploring Passive Aggression toward Teachers: A Qualitative Study of Classroom Power Struggles

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Abstract

Background: Passive-aggressive behaviors—such as sarcasm, procrastination, intentional inefficiency, and subtle noncompliance—are less studied while significantly impact classroom dynamics and teacher well-being. These behaviors often serve as indirect methods of resistance, particularly in emotionally complex or hierarchical classroom environments. This study aimed to explore how adolescents use passive-aggressive behaviors to navigate power struggles with teachers in classroom settings.

Methods: This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 27 high school students (aged 14–18) from Richmond Hill, Canada. The study participants were selected through purposive sampling technique, and data collection continued until no new insights emerged. Interviews were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's step-by-step thematic analysis using NVivo software. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open, clustered, and main thematic grouping through NVivo software, allowing for thematic analysis.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed four core categories of passive-aggressive behavior: Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement, Masked Opposition and Resistance, Emotional Expression through Indirect Means, and Power Rebalancing through Disruption. The participants described these behaviors as purposeful responses to perceived unfairness, emotional invalidation, or lack of autonomy. Actions such as exaggerated politeness, delayed compliance, and feigned confusion were commonly used to assert control without direct confrontation. The behaviors were shaped by emotional dynamics, relational tensions, and sociocultural factors within the school environment.

Conclusions: Passive aggression toward teachers is a complex, adaptive communication strategy used by students to manage perceived power imbalances. Recognizing these behaviors as emotionally and contextually driven can inform more empathetic and effective classroom practices.

Keywords: Aggression, Students; School Teachers, Interpersonal Relations, Social Interaction

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1. Introduction

In contemporary educational settings, the nature of student-teacher relationships is increasingly recognized as a dynamic interplay of psychological, emotional, and social forces (1-3). While the existing literature has focused on overt aggression and explicit misconduct, there is a growing need to understand the more subtle, yet equally disruptive, forms of student resistance—particularly passive-aggressive behaviors (4-7). These behaviors, which include procrastination, sarcasm, subtle defiance, and intentional inefficiency, represent complex power maneuvers that challenge teacher authority without direct confrontation. Such behaviors are difficult to detect, hard to discipline, and often emotionally taxing for educators, thereby complicating the pedagogical process (8, 9). Understanding how and why students engage

in passive-aggressive behavior toward teachers is essential for building safer, more productive classroom environments and preserving teacher well-being (10, 11).

Passive aggression in the classroom should be understood within the broader psychological, sociocultural, and institutional contexts that shape students' behavior. Unlike overt aggression, which has been studied extensively in terms of physical violence, verbal attacks, and rule violations (12, 13), passive aggression tends to manifest through behaviors that appear benign on the surface but are loaded with intent to resist, challenge, or punish the teacher covertly (4, 6). For example, students may “forget” homework repeatedly, respond with exaggerated politeness, or delay tasks indefinitely, using these actions as subtle means to express resentment, assert control, or destabilize the

teacher's authority (14, 15). These behaviors often go unreported or unaddressed, but their cumulative psychological effects on teachers and their broader implications for classroom climate are substantial (15, 16).

While passive-aggressive behaviors are not exclusive to the classroom, the hierarchical nature of educational environments makes them particularly salient. In classrooms, teachers occupy institutional roles of authority, which may be perceived by students as controlling or unjust, particularly in contexts marked by high academic pressure, strict discipline, or poor teacher-student rapport (3, 7, 17-19). When students lack emotional tools or social permission to voice dissatisfaction openly, they may resort to indirect forms of defiance. These behaviors are not necessarily rooted in inherent student deviance; rather, they may represent coping strategies, survival mechanisms, or expressions of emotional conflict (20, 21). Thus, investigating passive aggression in student populations requires a lens that considers not only behavioral expressions but also the internalized social and emotional contexts that shape them.

Previous studies examined the broader spectrum of student aggression toward teachers, highlighting both physical and verbal forms of hostility; Andersen and colleagues found that teachers exposed to persistent aggression reported significantly higher levels of occupational stress, which was mediated by the level of social support they received (10). While these findings are critical, they primarily address explicit behaviors that are easier to identify and quantify. In contrast, passive aggression often operates beneath the surface and is entangled with students' perceptions of justice, identity, and autonomy in the classroom (5, 22).

Passive-aggressive behavior is not merely a matter of poor classroom etiquette; it is often a symptom of broader psychosocial tensions, including the need to assert control in disempowering contexts or respond to perceived humiliation or loss of face (6, 23). In cultures where hierarchy and respect are emphasized, such as many immigrant or collectivist backgrounds, open defiance may be socially sanctioned, making passive resistance a safer, more acceptable outlet for frustration (4). Moreover, adolescent students—especially during critical identity-formation years—may be more prone to resist authority figures symbolically as a

way to explore autonomy or social belonging (24, 25). In this light, passive-aggressive behaviors are not simply disruptive; they are communicative, signaling unspoken grievances and power struggles that are integral to the learning environment.

From the teacher's perspective, passive aggression is particularly challenging because it defies conventional classroom management strategies. Traditional disciplinary actions are often ineffective or inappropriate in addressing subtle forms of resistance, such as delayed task submission, mumbling, or non-responsiveness (26, 27). Teachers may perceive these behaviors as signs of disengagement or disinterest rather than deliberate defiance, potentially overlooking the underlying emotional dynamics (28, 29). When left unaddressed, these behaviors can erode the teacher's sense of control and professional efficacy, ultimately leading to emotional fatigue and diminished instructional quality (11, 30). Accordingly, understanding the subjective experiences of students who engage in passive-aggressive behavior is crucial for developing more responsive and psychologically informed classroom interventions.

Existing research on the psychological and institutional contributors to student aggression pointed to multiple intersecting factors, including perceived injustice, lack of relational support, negative peer influences, and teacher-related triggers such as authoritarian teaching styles or inconsistent enforcement of rules (9, 31). While many of these studies employ quantitative methods to measure the prevalence and effects of aggression, fewer have adopted qualitative approaches that explore how students make sense of their own behavior and relational dynamics with teachers. Passive-aggressive behavior among adolescents can function as an indirect way of expressing frustration, preserving autonomy, and resisting perceived teacher authority. Such behavior may be influenced by emotional regulation difficulties, classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and cultural differences in expectations about authority and communication (13, 19, 25, 32). In multicultural settings such as Richmond Hill, Canada, these factors may become more complex because students from diverse backgrounds may interpret classroom rules, respect, and authority differently (5, 15, 16). However, previous studies have paid limited attention to adolescents' own perspectives on why they use

passive-aggressive behaviors, how they emotionally experience these behaviors, and how they interpret power struggles with teachers. Therefore, this study aimed to explore adolescents' lived experiences of passive-aggressive behavior toward teachers and to understand how such behaviors are used to manage authority, autonomy, dissatisfaction, and relational tensions in the classroom.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This study used a qualitative design with a thematic analysis approach (33) to identify recurring patterns in students' experiences of classroom dynamics and authority. The focus was on capturing subjective perceptions and lived narratives related to passive-aggressive responses toward teachers.

2.2. Selection and Description of Participants

The study participants were 27 adolescents (ages 14–18) residing in Richmond Hill, Canada. All were currently enrolled in secondary school. The inclusion criteria required at least one classroom experience involving perceived tension or a power imbalance with a teacher. Purposive sampling method was employed to secure rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all students (and guardians where required), and confidentiality was assured.

2.3. Sample Size Determination

The target sample was governed by information power and thematic saturation principles typical of qualitative inquiry. Recruitment proceeded until no new codes or themes emerged in consecutive interviews, which occurred at 27 participants. This size provided sufficient breadth and depth to capture heterogeneity across school grade levels, gender, and classroom contexts while allowing for iterative analysis and verification.

2.4. Data Collection and Measurements

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit personal narratives and subjective appraisals of teacher-student interactions. The guide included open-

ended prompts on (a) the nature of interactions with teachers, (b) emotional responses to classroom authority, and (c) concrete behaviors reflecting passive resistance. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a private, quiet setting to promote comfort and confidentiality. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and traceability of meaning units.

2.5. Procedure

Eligible students were identified through purposive outreach in local secondary schools and community channels. After screening for inclusion criteria, the researcher scheduled one-on-one sessions at times convenient for the participants. At the start of each session, the interviewer reviewed the study purpose, risks/benefits, privacy safeguards, and the voluntary nature of participation before obtaining written consent (and parental consent for minors). Interviews were then conducted using the semi-structured guide, with probes used to deepen or clarify responses. Field notes documented contextual observations (e.g., nonverbal cues, pauses). At the conclusion, the participants could review key points and were informed about optional member-checking. Data collection and preliminary coding proceeded iteratively until thematic saturation was reached.

2.6. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (33) six phases of thematic analysis (familiarization, thematic grouping, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, reporting). NVivo Ver. 12 qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with the systematic thematic grouping and organization of the data. The analysis followed a step-by-step process: (1) initial familiarization with the transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) grouping of codes into potential themes, (4) and refinement of these themes through constant comparison. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, thematic grouping was conducted independently by two researchers and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Additionally, member checking was performed with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the interpreted themes with their lived experiences.

3. Results

The present study involved 27 student participants residing in Richmond Hill, Canada, ranging in age from 14 to 18 years. Among them, 15 identified as female and 12 as male. In terms of grade level, 8 participants were in Grade 9, 7 in Grade 10, 6 in Grade 11, and 6 in Grade 12. The majority of participants (n=18) attended public schools, while the remaining 9 were enrolled in private institutions. Cultural diversity was notable within the sample, with participants identifying as White (n=9), South Asian (n=6), East Asian (n=5), Black (n=4), and Middle Eastern (n=3). All participants reported having experienced at least one classroom situation in which they felt tension, conflict, or power imbalance with a teacher, qualifying them for inclusion in the study. The diversity in age, gender, school type, and ethnic background contributed to a broad spectrum of perspectives on passive-aggressive behaviours

within classroom settings.

In the initial phase of open thematic grouping, the data from all 27 interviews were thoroughly reviewed and broken down into discrete units of meaning to identify key expressions, behaviors, and responses that reflected passive-aggressive tendencies toward teachers. This thematic grouping process was guided by a bottom-up approach, allowing the codes to emerge directly from the data without being influenced by pre-existing theories. NVivo software facilitated the systematic thematic grouping and labeling of participant narratives, enabling the researchers to manage large amounts of qualitative data effectively. According to the Table 1, a total of 87 distinct open codes were generated, capturing the nuanced verbal and nonverbal expressions of passive aggression in classroom settings. Also, Table 1 presents these codes along with the interview participants who conveyed each behavior or sentiment.

Table 1: Initial thematic grouping with quotes

Initial Code	Interview Code(s)	Participant Quote
Avoiding Eye Contact	P4	"I just looked away and hoped they'd stop asking questions."
Delaying Assignments	P6	"I always waited until the last minute to hand things in."
Using Sarcasm	P14	"Sometimes I answered them with a joke, just to annoy."
Ignoring Instructions	P12	"When they gave instructions, I just kind of tuned out."
Whispering Complaints	P18	"I'd whisper to my friends about how unfair the teacher was."
Exaggerated Politeness	P3	"I was overly polite just to be passive-aggressive."
Nonverbal Resistance	P7	"I'd cross my arms and roll my eyes without saying anything."
Subtle Mockery	P11	"Sometimes I'd laugh quietly when they made mistakes."
Feigning Confusion	P2	"I'd ask the same question again pretending I didn't get it."
Procrastination	P15	"I kept putting off everything until I couldn't anymore."
Rolling Eyes	P9	"I'd roll my eyes every time they spoke."
Giving Short Answers	P5	"I answered with 'yes' or 'no' just to get it over with."
Withholding Participation	P16	"I wouldn't raise my hand even if I knew the answer."
Staring Silently	P21	"I'd just stare until they got uncomfortable."
Passive Disobedience	P1	"I knew what to do, I just didn't do it to annoy them."
Deflecting Blame	P22	"It wasn't my fault, it was always someone else's."
Pretending not to Hear	P10	"I'd pretend not to hear when they asked me something."
Intentional Forgetfulness	P13	"I'd forget my homework... on purpose."
Mumbling under Breath	P8	"I'd mumble stuff under my breath when they walked by."
Subdued Defiance	P20	"I did what they said, but I made sure they knew I hated it."
Appearing Disengaged	P6	"I'd sit there like I wasn't even in the room."
Mocking Tone	P17	"My tone was kind of mocking without being obvious."
Silent Treatment	P2	"I just didn't talk to them for days."
Minimal Effort	P24	"I gave the least possible effort to get a pass."
Backhanded Compliments	P26	"I'd say something nice that actually wasn't nice."
Fake Agreement	P4	"I agreed with them knowing I was going to do the opposite."
Over-compliance	P12	"I followed every rule too perfectly to make a point."
Questioning Authority Subtly	P19	"I'd ask questions in a way that made them seem wrong."
Shrugging off Feedback	P11	"I'd shrug and act like I didn't care what they said."
Side Conversations	P14	"I'd start chatting quietly when they tried to teach."
Facial Expressions of Discontent	P8	"I made sure my face showed I was annoyed."
Avoiding Group Work	P27	"I'd find ways to avoid working in groups."
Using Humor to Undermine	P5	"I'd make jokes that made them look silly."

Initial Code	Interview Code(s)	Participant Quote
Silent Protest	P20	"I just sat quietly and didn't engage at all."
Minimal Eye Contact	P3	"I avoided looking them in the eyes completely."
Reluctant Help	P18	"I'd help only when absolutely forced."
Responding with Indifference	P16	"My answers didn't show I cared at all."
Indirect Complaints	P7	"I'd complain about them to my friends instead."
Intentional Vagueness	P9	"I'd be vague so they couldn't really call me out."
Cynical Remarks	P23	"I'd make dark little comments here and there."
Tactical Silence	P13	"Sometimes I just didn't say anything at all."
Walking Slowly to Tasks	P25	"I'd walk like I had all the time in the world."
Manipulating Rules	P22	"I'd twist their rules to benefit me."
Claiming Misunderstanding	P1	"I'd say 'oh I didn't understand' when I clearly did."
Subtle Resistance to Praise	P10	"Even when praised, I'd look unimpressed."
Pretending to be Overwhelmed	P6	"I'd act like the work was too much to handle."
Avoiding Responsibility	P17	"I'd always say 'that's not my job' when asked."
Delayed Responses	P14	"I'd wait a long time before answering on purpose."
Evasive Responses	P2	"I gave answers that didn't actually answer."
Over-questioning Instructions	P26	"I'd ask again and again about the simplest thing."
Pretending to be Sick	P15	"I said I felt sick when I just didn't want to be there."
Complaining to Peers	P11	"I'd tell my friends how annoying they were."
Passive Opposition	P8	"I'd go along but silently hate it."
Making Excuses	P5	"I had a whole list of excuses ready."
Playing Dumb	P13	"I'd act like I didn't know what they meant."
Dragging Feet	P16	"I dragged my feet to everything."
Misinterpreting Tasks	P24	"I'd pretend I didn't understand simple tasks."
Resisting Correction	P19	"I pushed back every time they corrected me."
Sighing Loudly	P3	"I'd sigh loudly enough for everyone to hear."
Avoiding Leadership	P7	"I never wanted to lead group work."
Minimizing Conflict Overtly	P21	"I'd say 'sure, whatever' and not mean it."
Exaggerating Obstacles	P9	"I'd make things seem harder than they really were."
Reluctant Apology	P4	"I'd say sorry but in the most insincere way."
Dismissing Expectations	P12	"I'd say 'those expectations are unrealistic.'"
Withdrawing Effort	P6	"I stopped trying when I didn't like the teacher."
Hiding Mistakes	P17	"I'd quietly fix my mistakes before they saw them."
Overdoing Niceness	P25	"I was extra nice just to be fake about it."
Feigning Incompetence	P2	"I acted like I didn't know what I was doing."
Mock Compliance	P10	"I'd smile and nod then ignore them."
Stretching Deadlines	P1	"I'd take twice as long with assignments."
Using Humor to Deflect	P18	"I made a joke so I didn't have to answer seriously."
Claiming Confusion	P19	"I said 'I'm confused' but I wasn't really."
Repeating Past Issues	P23	"I'd keep bringing up past problems with them."
Non-responsiveness	P27	"Sometimes I just wouldn't respond at all."
Ignoring Deadlines	P8	"Deadlines? I didn't care about those."
Dismissing Authority	P26	"I'd say 'who are they to tell me?'"
Slouching Posture	P15	"I sat slouched like I was bored to death."
Foot Dragging	P16	"I shuffled my feet as slow as possible."
Feigning Distraction	P3	"I'd just act distracted so they'd leave me alone."
Speaking Softly	P20	"I talked so quietly they had to ask again."
Low-effort Work	P13	"I'd put almost no effort into the work."
Misusing Freedom	P5	"I used the rules to get out of doing things."
Disguised Criticism	P24	"I'd say something mean but in a polite tone."
Defensive Body Language	P9	"I crossed my arms and glared sometimes."
Justifying Delays	P4	"I had a whole story for why I didn't finish."
Over-explaining Actions	P22	"I gave a big explanation for a small mistake."
Avoiding Praise	P7	"I didn't want them to praise me at all."
Rolling Eyes at Peers	P12	"I'd roll my eyes at classmates trying too hard."
Ignoring Group Norms	P11	"I ignored what the group wanted to do."
Refusing Subtle Tasks	P6	"I'd find ways to skip the small tasks."
Pretending not to Care	P2	"I'd act like I didn't care one bit."
Expressing Fake Confusion	P18	"I'd act confused when I wasn't."
Minimizing Importance of Work	P17	"I'd say 'this work doesn't matter anyway.'"

In the clustered thematic grouping phase, the open codes previously identified were systematically analyzed to uncover relationships, patterns, and categories that connect them around central phenomena. This process involved grouping conceptually similar or functionally related open codes under broader, more abstract categories called clustered codes. These clustered codes reflect the central themes that structure participants' experiences and responses related to passive aggression in the classroom. According to Table 2, using constant comparison and memo writing in NVivo, we organized the 87 open codes into 20 clustered categories, each encompassing between

2 to 7 related open codes. This categorization revealed how students' passive-aggressive behaviors function as interconnected strategies of emotional expression, power negotiation, and resistance in classroom dynamics.

According to Table 3, the main thematic grouping process produced four overarching categories that frame the core dynamics of passive-aggressive behavior in the classroom. The first category, including Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement, encompasses behaviors that reflect students' deliberate retreat from classroom participation, either emotionally, cognitively, or

Table 2: Clustered thematic grouping

Clustered Code	Corresponding Initial Codes
Avoidance Behaviors	Avoiding Eye Contact; Minimal Eye Contact; Pretending Not to Hear; Silent Protest; Avoiding Praise; Feigning Distraction
Passive Non-Participation	Withholding Participation; Silent Treatment; Appearing Disengaged; Staring Silently; Non-responsiveness
Sarcastic or Mocking Expression	Using Sarcasm; Mocking Tone; Subtle Mockery; Backhanded Compliments; Disguised Criticism
Deflecting Responsibility	Deflecting Blame; Avoiding Responsibility; Making Excuses; Justifying Delays; Over-explaining Actions
Procrastination and Delay	Delaying Assignments; Procrastination; Stretching Deadlines; Dragging Feet; Walking Slowly to Tasks
Emotional Withdrawal	Withdrawing Effort; Pretending not to Care; Low-effort Work; Passive Opposition
Fake Compliance	Over-compliance; Fake Agreement; Mock Compliance; Minimal Effort
Disruptive Side Behavior	Side Conversations; Complaining to Peers; Whispering Complaints; Ignoring Group Norms
Exaggeration of Difficulty	Pretending to be Overwhelmed; Exaggerating Obstacles; Claiming Confusion; Feigning Incompetence; Expressing Fake Confusion
Rule Manipulation	Manipulating Rules; Misusing Freedom; Claiming Misunderstanding; Misinterpreting Tasks
Resistance to Authority	Dismissing Expectations; Dismissing Authority; Questioning Authority Subtly; Resisting Correction
Verbal Minimalism	Giving Short Answers; Evasive Responses; Speaking Softly; Delayed Responses
Physical Signals of Resistance	Rolling Eyes; Slouching Posture; Foot Dragging; Defensive Body Language; Facial Expressions of Discontent
Emotional Irony	Overdoing Niceness; Exaggerated Politeness; Fake Agreement
Subtle Provocation	Using Humor to Undermine; Using Humor to Deflect; Cynical Remarks
Cognitive Avoidance	Tactical Silence; Intentional Vagueness; Feigning Confusion
Unacknowledged Non-Cooperation	Refusing Subtle Tasks; Avoiding Group Work; Avoiding Leadership
Repetitive Complaint Patterns	Repeating Past Issues; Indirect Complaints; Complaining to Peers
Boundary Setting Through Disengagement	Shrugging off Feedback; Ignoring Instructions; Ignoring Deadlines
Defensive Adaptation	Hiding Mistakes; Rolling Eyes at Peers; Mocking Tone

Table 3: Selective thematic grouping

Selective Code (Main Category)	Corresponding Clustered Codes (Sub Categories)
Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement	Avoidance Behaviors; Passive Non-Participation; Emotional Withdrawal; Unacknowledged Non-Cooperation; Verbal Minimalism; Boundary Setting Through Disengagement
Masked Opposition and Resistance	Fake Compliance; Resistance to Authority; Rule Manipulation; Defensive Adaptation; Cognitive Avoidance
Emotional Expression Through Indirect Means	Sarcastic or Mocking Expression; Subtle Provocation; Exaggeration of Difficulty; Emotional Irony; Repetitive Complaint Patterns
Power Rebalancing Through Disruption	Disruptive Side Behavior; Physical Signals of Resistance; Deflecting Responsibility; Procrastination and Delay

behaviorally, as a means of expressing dissatisfaction without confrontation. The second category, including Masked Opposition and Resistance, captures covert resistance tactics where students comply outwardly while subtly undermining authority and expectations. Emotional Expression through Indirect Means reflects students' reliance on sarcasm, irony, exaggerated complaints, and humor to communicate discomfort or resentment without direct conflict. Finally, Power Rebalancing through Disruption includes behaviors aimed at subtly disrupting classroom norms and teacher control, often through delays, complaints, or bodily expressions of resistance. Together, these main themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how students navigate perceived power struggles with teachers using complex, indirect strategies grounded in passive aggression.

4. Discussion

The present study explored the passive-aggressive behaviors of adolescents toward teachers within the context of perceived classroom power struggles, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 27 students in Richmond Hill, Canada. Through thematic analysis, the study identified four major themes: Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement, Masked Opposition and Resistance, Emotional Expression through Indirect Means, and Power Rebalancing through Disruption. These findings illuminated how students use covert, indirect behaviors to navigate authority, express discontent, and protect a sense of autonomy in environments where overt opposition is either risky or socially discouraged.

One of the most prominent categories, Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement, encompassed behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, feigning distraction, giving minimal responses, or emotionally disengaging from classroom tasks. These actions often signal psychological withdrawal rather than mere apathy. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that passive withdrawal is frequently used by students as a form of self-preservation in emotionally unsafe classroom environments (15, 16). For many students, the classroom becomes a space where assertive disagreement is perceived as dangerous or disrespectful, particularly in culturally diverse contexts where norms around authority and emotional expression differ (4, 6). As a result,

students resort to non-participation and physical or emotional distancing as a form of silent protest or emotional boundary-setting.

The second major category, Masked Opposition and Resistance, revealed the use of seemingly cooperative behaviors—such as over-compliance, mock politeness, or intentional rule manipulation—to express hidden defiance. These strategies reflect students' need to challenge authority while maintaining plausible deniability. Similar observations were reported in research by Emmerová and co-workers, who noted that students often use “polished disobedience” to avoid confrontation while subtly undermining teacher directives (30). Rean and Eropoba also noted the increasing sophistication of student resistance, emphasizing that passive forms of aggression are more psychologically taxing for teachers than open defiance due to their ambiguity and persistence (24). This subtle resistance may be motivated by a desire to maintain dignity, exert control, or retaliate in environments where students feel powerless or unheard.

Emotional Expression through Indirect Means emerged as another powerful category. This included the use of sarcasm, humor, exaggerated complaints, and indirect insults—emotional tools that allow students to communicate frustration, disappointment, or resentment without direct confrontation. Prior studies highlighted the communicative function of such behaviors. For instance, McMahon and colleagues emphasized that verbal indirect aggression often serves as an emotional release valve in classrooms where relational strain is high (9). Likewise, research by Brittain and Vaillancourt demonstrated how emotional withdrawal or indirect aggression can emerge in students experiencing psychological insecurity or relational threats, often shaped by earlier experiences of emotional manipulation or love withdrawal (23). The current findings reinforce the idea that emotional expression through passive-aggressive channels is not a sign of disengagement but a form of meaning-making in a constrained interpersonal context.

Finally, the category of Power Rebalancing through Disruption was particularly revealing in highlighting the agency of students who, despite not challenging teachers openly, deliberately used behavioral delays, disruptive side conversations,

and bodily expressions of defiance (e.g., rolling eyes, sighing) to assert influence in the classroom dynamic. These findings resonate with the work of Andersen and co-workers, who found that students often use minor yet consistent forms of resistance to disrupt classroom flow as a way to negotiate perceived power imbalances (10). Similarly, Rean and colleagues explained that students' resistance may be tied to identity assertion, especially during adolescence when the need for autonomy, peer recognition, and self-validation becomes central to psychosocial development (5). The study of Arikan further supported this interpretation, noting that resistance behaviors are often tied to emotional and social responses rather than strictly academic motives (26).

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that passive aggression toward teachers is not merely oppositional behavior but a complex, adaptive response to relational, emotional, and institutional factors. Students who feel unheard, disrespected, or disempowered may lack the communication skills or social permission to express themselves assertively. As a result, they adopt subtle, indirect methods to protect their identity, challenge power, and assert emotional boundaries. In this way, passive-aggressive behavior becomes a language of its own—one that signals unmet needs and relational dysfunction in the classroom.

These findings contribute to the growing body of research that frames student misbehavior as a relational and contextual phenomenon rather than simply a disciplinary issue. For example, Sevrika and Merina emphasized that teachers' responses to misbehavior significantly shape whether resistance escalates or resolves (20). Similarly, Pankowska argued that teacher training programs must go beyond behaviorist discipline techniques and incorporate psychological insight into student motivation and emotional expression (31). When teachers interpret passive-aggressive behavior as laziness or rudeness, they risk missing the deeper emotional signals behind those actions—and may inadvertently escalate rather than resolve classroom tensions.

Moreover, the present study affirms the significance of teacher-student relationships in shaping behavioral dynamics. Research showed that teacher empathy, consistency, and emotional availability are critical in mitigating student

aggression and promoting healthier classroom environments (21, 34). In contrast, inconsistent discipline, perceived unfairness, or emotionally distant teaching styles can amplify student frustration and encourage covert resistance. As Emmerová and Kohútová noted, emotional climates within classrooms often predict the form and frequency of student aggression (35). Thus, understanding passive aggression as part of a relational ecosystem, rather than a personality flaw or individual pathology, is essential for developing more humane and effective educational practices. These findings suggest passive aggression can be understood as a communicative strategy reflecting unmet needs and relational tensions in the classroom. While significant, these findings remain context-specific and exploratory.

Furthermore, the psychological toll of managing passive aggression on teachers must not be overlooked. Winding and co-workers found that persistent exposure to low-level student resistance significantly contributes to teacher burnout, especially when compounded by a lack of institutional support (11). In this study, several of the open codes—such as delayed responses, disingenuous compliance, and emotional disengagement—can be seen as forms of “slow sabotage” that erode classroom momentum and emotional energy over time. These findings echo the conclusion of Emmerová and Jablonský that the ambiguity and frequency of passive resistance often leave teachers feeling disoriented, invalidated, and emotionally depleted (30).

In addition to emotional and relational dimensions, cultural norms and school structures also appear to play a role. The Richmond Hill context provided a multicultural backdrop in which diverse norms of authority, respect, and emotional expression intersect. For some students, especially those from collectivist or high-power-distance cultural backgrounds, open confrontation may be considered highly inappropriate, prompting more covert forms of expression (4, 6). At the same time, students acculturated into Western norms of assertiveness may view indirect resistance as strategic rather than evasive. As such, culturally responsive pedagogy and an awareness of the sociocultural roots of behavior are crucial for interpreting passive aggression appropriately and responding constructively.

4.1. Limitations

While this study offered valuable insights into the experiences and behaviors of adolescents who engage in passive aggression toward teachers, it is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to students from a single urban area in Canada, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Second, data collection relied exclusively on self-reported narratives through interviews, which may be influenced by social desirability or memory bias. Third, the study focused solely on the student perspective and did not include teacher viewpoints, which could have provided a more balanced understanding of the relational dynamics involved. Finally, because this was a qualitative study, the findings are exploratory and interpretive rather than predictive or generalizable.

5. Conclusions

The present study revealed that adolescents' passive-aggressive behaviors toward teachers are not merely acts of defiance but complex communicative strategies rooted in emotional, relational, and contextual dynamics. Through thematic analysis, four core patterns—Strategic Withdrawal and Disengagement, Masked Opposition and Resistance, Emotional Expression through Indirect Means, and Power Rebalancing through Disruption—emerged as ways students navigate classroom authority and protect their autonomy in environments perceived as emotionally restrictive or unresponsive. These findings highlight that passive aggression often reflects unmet psychological needs, perceived inequities, and constrained opportunities for authentic communication. Recognizing such behaviors as relational signals rather than disciplinary problems can guide educators toward empathy-based, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed approaches that foster emotional safety and open dialogue. Ultimately, addressing passive aggression requires schools to reframe behavioral management as a process of relational repair and mutual understanding, emphasizing connection over control to build healthier, more equitable teacher–student interactions.

Future research should examine passive-aggressive behavior using larger and more diverse samples, multiple stakeholder perspectives,

longitudinal designs, and mixed-methods approaches to better understand its development, consequences, and contextual influences. Intervention studies should also assess strategies aimed at improving communication, emotional regulation, and trust in classrooms. In practice, teachers and school leaders should view passive-aggressive behavior as a potential sign of underlying relational or emotional difficulties rather than solely as misconduct. Training in emotional literacy, culturally responsive communication, and restorative practices, along with supportive classroom environments that encourage open dialogue and mutual respect, may help reduce covert resistance and strengthen teacher–student relationships.

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Declaration of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT 5.5) for language editing. All content was manually reviewed and edited by the authors to ensure its accuracy and academic integrity; the authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Authors' Contributions

Ali Aghaziarati: Contributions to the conception and design of the study, data collection, and interpretation of findings; drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. Kamdin Parsakia: Contributions to data analysis, reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such that the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

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Ethical Approval

The KMAN Research Institute of Canada approved the present research with the code of

KEC.2025.04D08. Prior to the commencement of the study, all participants were informed about the research objectives, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Also, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Measures were taken to ensure the anonymity of participants, and personal identifiers were removed or altered in the transcription process.

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