Exploring the Lived Experience of Youth Who Have Been Suspended From Secondary School:

A Narrative Inquiry

by

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YOUTH SUSPENDED FROM SCHOOL

Abstract

Despite empirical evidence suggesting that out of school suspensions do more harm than good, they are still commonplace in education system. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, 33,030 secondary school students were suspended during the 2017-2018 academic year. Students who have been suspended are at an increased risk for future suspensions and are less likely to complete secondary school (Nichols, 2004). The purpose of this study was to document, analyze and interpret the lived experience of youth who have been suspended one or more times from an Ontario secondary school and hear their voices. The data for this narrative inquiry was collected through three in depth semi-structured interviews with each one of the three participants. The interviews audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. The common themes of aspirations and feeling ignored and excluded spanned all participant narratives. Findings also identified a third theme. For two participants, this was the theme of childhood adversity, and for one participant, the third theme was parental support and expectations. The narratives were originally intended to be viewed through a self-efficacy lens; however, an inductive framework helped draw more meaning from the participant stories. Therefore, the narratives were also viewed through a temporal- needs threat model of ostracism. This study responds to the gap in the literature by hearing the voices of those often not heard and makes sense of youths’ experiences with suspension. The findings can help to increase educator understanding of youths’ experiences and underscores the need for more research.
Acknowledgements

A deep hearted thank you goes out to the three participants who made this research possible. Thank you for trusting me and sharing your stories. I learned a great deal from all three of you and have been humbled by your stories. I hope you all continue to follow your dreams and that the people you meet along the way see the strength that is inside of you.

A big thank you also goes out to my supervisor, Dr. Ian Matheson and committee member Dr. Jamie Pyper. Thank you both for your patience and support through the long process. I am grateful for the encouraging words and the thoughtful feedback that has helped get me to where I am.

Lastly, thank you to my partner Eric. Thank you for keeping me focused and being my voice of reason. Your support has been endless throughout my grad studies, and we’ve navigated many changes over the last couple years. Here is to many more adventures – Salud!
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Problem Statement

Despite empirical evidence suggesting that out of school suspensions do more harm than good, they are still commonplace in our education system (Rosenbaum, 2018). In Ontario, 5.02% of secondary school students, or 33,030 were suspended during the 2017-2018 academic year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Adolescence is a particularly tumultuous time for many, and this is reflected in the increase in secondary school student’s suspension rates when compared to elementary students at 1.87% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). In Ontario, exclusionary discipline includes suspensions and expulsions. Suspensions are defined as a practice where a student is temporarily removed and prohibited from school property. A suspension must be given for a specific number of days ranging from one to 20 school days and is used as a measure to manage misbehaviour, as defined by the school. Once the suspension is complete, the student can return to school. Alternatively, expulsions remove a student from a specific school for an indefinite amount of time and are considerably less common. In the 2017-2018 academic year, only 0.04% of secondary school students were expelled (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020).

It is widely understood that suspensions disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, and have lasting consequences, that span much longer than the number of days a student is suspended (Zheng, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2018). Ontario’s largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the only Ontario school board that collects and publishes significant data on suspensions. A TDSB report released by Zheng (2019) shows that students
with learning disabilities or special education designations, students who are Black and students who live outside of two-parent homes are disproportionality suspended when compared to their peers. Some of the lasting consequences that have been linked to being suspended include a lower likelihood of completing secondary school and higher likelihood of criminal involvement (Rosenbaum, 2018).

Researchers have studied and recorded data on suspensions, but rarely is the student voice heard. Students who are suspended from school are actively being disenfranchised from their right to education and are greatly impacted, but seldom have any power to elicit change. Quantitative research has provided us the numbers that show the stark inequalities in who gets suspended, as well as negative impacts that are associated with suspensions, but we must also listen to the voices of those who have been suspended. It is imperative to explore this gap in the research and understand the phenomenon from the perspective of someone who has lived experience with being suspended.

Lastly, this research is timely. The Ontario Ministry of Education has acknowledged that the use of suspensions can be harmful, and action needs to be taken to reduce suspensions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education changed their disciplinary policies to reduce the number of students being suspended and allow principals to use their professional discretion. Prior to this change, in the 2007-2008 academic year, 7.82% of all secondary school students were suspended. Additionally, in 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Education made policy changes to reduce the use of suspensions with students from kindergarten to grade three. Although suspension rates have declined for both elementary and secondary school students, problem behaviours, such as violence in the classroom are on the rise (Santor et al, 2019). Santor and colleagues (2019) released concerning statistics that highlight the rising
level of student on educator violence in Ontario elementary schools. It is evident that there is a large multi-faceted issue. Although suspension rates have decreased a few percentage points over the last decade, tens of thousands of students are still being suspended, and behavioural problems, such as violence in the classroom are on the rise. The phenomenon of suspensions must be approached with a perspective that includes the experience of students who have been greatly impacted by suspensions.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to document, analyse and interpret the lived experience of youth who have been suspended one or more times from an Ontario secondary school. I wanted to capture the voices that have been underrepresented in research on suspensions and to understand their experiences. Specifically, I sought to understand the perspectives of youths’ experiences with suspensions through a self-efficacy lens. The use of a self-efficacy lens was intended to help draw meaning from the participants narratives. Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory describes that one’s belief in their ability to successfully complete a task can influence their current and future performance of that task. I sought to understand how self-efficacy applied to the participants experiences in school with suspensions.

This study is guided by three research questions that will invite reflections from participants in semi-structured interviews to share their stories. The three research questions are as follows:

1) How have suspensions impacted a youth’s current employment/educational status?

2) What influences a student’s experience of suspensions?

3) How has one’s self-efficacy beliefs impacted their experiences?
By understanding the experiences of those who have been impacted by suspensions, I hope that this research can help elicit change in the way discipline is managed in schools. Meaningful change to school disciplinary policies must be informed by a holistic perspective – including the perspective of those who have been suspended. I also hope that this research will shed light on other areas of concern related to suspensions and spark further research.

**Personal Narrative**

To position oneself in their research, Clandinin (2013) suggests narrative researchers include an autobiographical narrative. The inclusion of an autobiographical narrative is meant for the researcher to examine how their own experiences and stories relate to the research and to share our own justifications and biases (Clandinin, 2013). And so, I conclude the introduction with a reflection on how I arrived at this research topic.

Prior to starting my graduate degree, I spent four years working almost exclusively in the outdoors. In this time, I traveled thousands of kilometres through the backcountry, hiking, canoeing and dog sledding, guiding people from all walks of life through the natural world. When in the backcountry, life as we know it is changed. All of the sudden there are no longer the distractions we use to avoid uncomfortable feelings. The noisiness of our busy lives is silenced, and we are forced to truly listen, to ourselves, and to those few that are around us. The conversations shared across the dim glow of a fire or exchanged between two people in a canoe who are not facing each other are incredibly powerful. The walls we have built around ourselves start to erode and connections are formed. When most people head into the backcountry, they are at least a little worried. They commonly fear the water, the animals, the dark, or simply the unknown. But, with time, people begin to see it as a safer place than what their regular day to day life offers. People share things they have never shared before, accomplish things they never
imagined, and connect with people they normally never would. Expeditionary travel has a special way of bringing people together. People begin to see the group as their safety net. The group is what protects them, and everyone’s contributions becoming meaningful.

One student that stands out in memory is Ryan (pseudonym). He should have been half-way through high school, but increasingly stopped going to in his late elementary years. He was kicked out of just about every school and program he attended. When Mom could not deal with him anymore, he got sent to live with Dad, and the reverse happened too. When he entered the program that I was working in, he was angry. He was angry at the world and had no reason to trust any of the staff. It was just above freezing and pouring rain as we hiked into our campsite. Just around the corner from our campsite he gave up. He was ready to AWOL. He was determined to leave the program. I calmly explained how AWOL’s worked, and how long the hike was out to a real road (40+km), and that it was open hunting season. I told him the decision was up to him, and we would walk with him the whole way to keep him safe. I helped him get dressed for his AWOL. I pulled out the warmest clothes, hunters orange, extra socks and made sure his water was filled. Ryan was caught off guard. Normally if he were about to AWOL he would be chased, restrained or the police would be called. He upped the ante, and started making threats, and yelling harsh accusations. Ryan was so used to being kicked out of every setting he stepped foot in, and he was ready to be kicked out as soon as he could from our program. As he started to walk out of the woods, the weather turned worse. Ryan ended up taking cover in the nearest thing that resembled a shelter. Staff hunkered down with him and started to build a relationship. Then the pivotal moment came. Ryan started to trust that our team was there to support him, no matter the circumstance. Ryan decided he would join the group, at least for a
night. He hiked back to camp, and we welcomed him with a hot meal. We got him warmed up and helped him settle into bed under his tarp shelter.

The long day was a turning point for Ryan and the beginning of his new journey. His knack for starting fires was recognized as a valuable skill, and his rambunctious personality helped people get through challenging days. He began to see how he belonged, and how his contributions were valuable to our community. Fast forward one and half years and Ryan was caught up academically, built healthier relationships, and had no further police contact. Ryan graduated the program, and left feeling accomplished. Ryan experienced feeling a part of a community, perhaps for the first time.

This story was not unique to Ryan. Many of the students tried their best to get kicked out. That is what they expected would happen anyways. AWOLS often became a turning point for the youth and marked the beginning of a long journey. It was tough to see so many kids who entered the program just expecting to be excluded. Many could not articulate a time they truly felt included and recognized for their inherent strengths. When they shared their stories, their pain was palpable. Their experiences with exclusionary discipline changed their views of themselves and wore them down. The conversations I had with people when their walls came down were raw, emotional, and powerful. I felt humbled that people would share these vulnerable stories with me, and I felt a sense of duty. Waiting lists for these residential programs were often more than a year long and were not accessible to many people. I wanted to better understand their journeys of exclusionary discipline in hopes of being able to make change. Understanding the issues and making change at the public-school level could mean positive change may impact the widest audience.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature. I begin by presenting a brief history of school discipline policies followed by an overview of who is suspended. I highlight the groups of people who are suspended at disproportionate rates and other trends seen in suspension data. Then I present research on self-regulation as it relates to school suspensions and explore the impacts suspensions have on students. Next, I introduce literature that focuses on alternatives to suspensions in secondary school settings, and the effectiveness of these programs. Then I introduce research that focuses on suspensions and the student voice. Lastly, I conclude with a section on self-efficacy as a conceptual framework.

Providing Context: The History and Current Practice of School Discipline

Challenging student behaviour has been a common experience in schools. In North America, the ways in which schools have attempted to deal with this phenomenon has shifted to reflect the various ways our society views appropriate responses to problem behaviours. Prior to the 1960’s, corporal punishment and humiliation were common strategies used to discipline students (Milne & Aurini, 2017). These coercive punishment strategies, such as the strap and dunce caps began to fade as societal views on acceptable punishment strategies shifted. Suspensions, a temporary removal from school for specific number of days, and expulsions, an indefinite removal from school, then began to emerge as the primary method to manage misbehaviour. The intended purpose was to “send a message” and to deter undesirable behaviours, in both the offending student, and their peers (Winton, 2013).

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, public concern for school safety was increasing and schools began to implement “zero tolerance” policies. The zero tolerance policies had their foundations
in military and criminal justice systems and mandated suspensions and expulsions as pre-set consequences for student infractions, regardless of context (Winton, 2013). Zero tolerance was a reactive policy that had little, if any preventative focus. Across North America, zero tolerance policies became standard practice in schools, and in 2000, the Ministry of Education in Ontario introduced the Safe Schools Act to all publicly funded schools (Winton, 2013). In essence, this was a zero-tolerance policy. This Act left little room for professional discretion, and as a result, school suspension and expulsion rates skyrocketed, particularly for racial minorities, and students with special needs (Winton, 2013; Milne & Aurini, 2017). By 2005, the Ontario Human Rights Commission filed an official complaint on behalf of the students. This complaint led to a settlement in 2007 that mandated the Ministry of Education to remove all references to zero tolerance in their policy documents and to review discipline procedures (Winton, 2013). Later in 2007, Bill 212, Progressive Discipline and School Safety Act (Education Amendment Act, 2007), replaced the Safe Schools Act. By 2009, the respective Progressive Discipline policy was adopted province wide (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). The changes to the government legislation allowed for the use of professional discretion when deciding if a suspension or expulsion would be issued. The Progressive Discipline policy also dictated that contextual and mitigating factors and student history must be taken into consideration (Winton, 2013).

Currently, the Ontario Ministry of Education uses two lists that outline behaviours that may warrant disciplinary measures. One list covers infractions such as uttering threats, swearing at a person in position of authority, and possession, or being under the influence of substances (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). These behaviours require the principal to consider suspension for students in grade four and up. The second list outlines behaviours that constitute an automatic suspension and can be considered grounds for expulsion at the principal’s and
schools boards discretion. This list includes trafficking of drugs or weapons, sexual assault, and physical assault that requires medical attention (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019).

**Who is Suspended?**

According to the most recent publicly available data, 5.02% of secondary school students, or 33,030 were suspended during the 2017-2018 academic year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Prior to the implementation of the Progressive Discipline policy, the 2007-2008 academic year saw 7.8% of secondary school students suspended (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). It is evident there has been a reduction in suspension use, however 5.02% of secondary students equates to approximately one in every 20 students being suspended in a given academic year. In contrast, only 0.04% of secondary students are expelled in a given academic year, suggesting that there is only a small number of students whose behaviour is severe enough to warrant removal from the school indefinitely (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Those students who are being expelled are the ones who supposedly cannot integrate effectively into the public-school system and need greater support that their local school cannot offer. Tens of thousands of secondary school students that are suspended each year are being temporarily removed from school for behaviours that are less severe. The Ontario Ministry of Education strives to have equitable and inclusive schools yet, the relatively high number of suspensions compared to expulsions does not appear to reflect this ideal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020).

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education releases an annual report that covers the suspension and expulsion data from each school board. This report shows total numbers of those suspended and expelled, numbers for elementary and secondary school students, gender of those suspended, and the number of those suspended with special education needs (Ontario Ministry of Education,
Ontario’s largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the only Ontario school board that releases an annual report on suspension and expulsion data and contains far more information than the one released by the Ministry of Education. The Caring and Safe Schools report released by the TDSB highlights some of the concealed disparities that are not visible in the Ministry of Education’s annual report. Although the TDSB has a lower secondary school suspension rate (3.08%, in 2017-2018) than the province of Ontario (5.02%, in 2017-2018), the TDSB Caring and Safe Schools report highlights some of the discrepancies about who is getting suspended (Zheng, 2019).

**Impact of gender, sexual orientation, and grade level**

Arguably, one of the strongest risk factors for suspension is gender. Males account for 77% of suspensions whereas females account for 22% of suspensions (Zheng, 2019). Given that the average ratio of males to females in the TDSB is nearly 1:1, males are over-represented in suspensions. Additionally, according to the 2017 TDSB census, 0.4% of students self-identified as non-binary, but represented 0.8% of suspended students (Zheng, 2019). In the province wide report released by the Ontario Ministry of Education for 2017-2018, similar data is found for male and female suspension rates, but non-binary students are not included in the data (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). In terms of sexual orientation, 92% of students in grade seven and above reported being heterosexual and 8% identified as questioning or LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirited, queer or pansexual) (Zheng, 2019). These numbers were proportionately reflected in suspension rates (Zheng, 2019).

Furthermore, suspension rates gradually increase with each subsequent grade level, until it peaks at grade 10 at 3.8% (Zheng, 2019). In grades 11 and 12, suspension rates decrease to 3% and 2.4% respectively (Zheng, 2019). Although there are likely many factors that contribute to
the reduction of suspensions in the final years of secondary school, early student attrition from
school of those who have been suspended previously may account for the lower number of
suspensions.

**Students with learning disabilities and special education designations**

In Ontario schools, students with special education designations are being suspended at
disproportionate rates compared to students with no special education designation. Ontario wide,
46% of students who are suspended have a special education designation (Ontario Ministry of
Education, 2020). In the TDSB, 60% of those suspended had a special education designation
(excluding students identified as gifted) (Zheng, 2019). Considering students with special
education needs account for only 17% of the student body, the highly disproportionate rate of
suspensions is a significant cause for concern (Zheng, 2019).

In other literature, it has also been found that students with exceptionalities face higher
rates of suspensions compared to their peers without exceptionalities (Bauermeister et al., 2007;
McNamara & Willoughby, 2010; Bender, 2008). Of note, students with attention deficit
hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were found to be suspended at disproportionate rates when
compared to their peers without ADHD. A compelling study done by Bauermeister et al., (2007)
investigated the relationship between ADHD and school suspension. Researchers looked at a
large community-based sample of school children (N= 1896) and found that boys with ADHD
were 2.3 times more likely to be suspended than those without ADHD. Shockingly, in this Puerto
Rican based study, that meant that 22.7% of boys aged 4 -17 with ADHD had been suspended at
least once. This was compared to the island wide 9.9% suspension rate (Bauermeister et al.,
2007). ADHD may not be the lone factor in the disproportionately high suspension rates as those
with an ADHD diagnoses have higher rates of comorbidity with learning disabilities,
oppositional defiance disorder, and conduct disorder, all of which also increase suspension risk due to the associated behaviours (Willcutt & Pennington, 2000).

An Ontario based study by McNamara and Willoughby (2010) explored the relationship between risk-taking behaviour and adolescents with a learning disability. They found that over a 21-month period, adolescents with learning disabilities showed significantly greater increases in risk-taking behaviour when compared to their non-learning-disabled peers. Specifically, the risky behaviours that increased significantly when compared to non-learning-disabled peers were smoking, hard-drug use, and acts of direct aggression (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010). The increase in these risky behaviours from adolescents with learning disabilities may help to explain their disproportionate suspension rates. In Bender’s (2008) work, it was suggested that the secondary characteristics of learning disabilities were what increased participation in risky behaviours. These secondary characteristics included decreased self-esteem, lower sense of well being, and higher anxiety. According to Bender (2008), secondary characteristics were cumulative and often built throughout the school years, which is also reflected in the increasing rate of suspensions for each subsequent grade (Toronto District School Board, 2017). Bender (2008) suggested that as students enter adolescence, they often become more aware of their differences and experience more embarrassment. Unfortunately, this all too often led to maladaptive coping mechanisms and behaviours that increased their chances of being suspended (Bender, 2008).

Ontario’s Ministry of Education strives to provide an equitable and inclusive learning environment for the student population, but the use of suspensions with specific groups of people is alarming (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Those with special education designations receive suspensions at significantly higher rates than those without special education needs
(Zheng, 2019). Additionally, other research has shown students with specific learning disabilities and ADHD are also suspended at higher rates than students without specific learning disabilities or ADHD (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010; Bauermeister et al., 2007). When serving a suspension, these students are actively being excluded from their schools and learning environments.

**Ethno-Racial background and culture**

Self-identified ethno-racial background, and language spoken at home are also an important factor in student suspension rates. The TDSB is a diverse school district and sees students from a variety of backgrounds. Approximately 25% of students in the TDSB are born outside of Canada, and 64% of students came from families where both of their parents were born outside of Canada (Zheng, 2019). This highly diverse community however has disparities in suspension rates. Table 1 and Table 2 below highlight the discrepancies seen throughout the TDSB based on language spoken at home and ethno-racial background, respectively.

**Table 1**

**Student Suspension Rates by Primary Language Spoken at Home (2017-2018)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Suspension Representation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Zheng, 2019)

Tables 1 shows the large discrepancies seen in suspensions related to language spoken at home. Students who speak English at home are suspended one and a half times more than their
representation in the student body (Zheng, 2019). Similarly, high disproportionality in
representation is seen in suspensions of students who speak Somali or Arabic at home (Zheng,
2019). Alternatively, students who speak Chinese (9.5%) at home are suspended (1.6%) far less
often than peers who speak languages other than Chinese at home.

**Table 2**

*Student Suspension Rates by Self-Identified Ethno-Racial Background (2016-2017)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Suspension Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Ethno-Racial</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Zheng, 2019)

Tables 2 shows that students who identify as Black are suspended at a rate greater than three
times their representation in the general student body. Students who identify as Indigenous are
also suspended at approximately three times their representation in the student body (Zheng,
2019). On the contrary, students who identify as East, South, and South East Asian have much
lower suspension representation compared to their representation in the student population.

In other peer-reviewed literature, researchers have identified disproportionately higher
rates of racial minorities being suspended, and particularly for students who identify as Black
(Cooley, 1995; Krezmien, et al., 2006; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002). A report
released by Losen and Gillespie (2012) titled *Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of*
Disciplinary Exclusion from School, highlights the wide disparities in suspensions across the United States of America (US). In the 2009-2010 academic year, across the US, 17% of Black students were suspended compared to 5% of White students, and 2% of Asian-American students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). The report also found more specifically that Black students with disabilities were even more likely to be suspended. In the 2009-2010 academic year, 25% of students who were Black and had a disability were suspended (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). It is clear a discrepancy in suspensions issued in the context of race exists, both in Ontario and the US, and Black students are frequently overrepresented (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002, Zheng, 2019).

**Parental influences**

From census data collected by the TDSB, it is also apparent that parental influences are related to discrepancies in suspension rates. Of the student body in the TDSB, 81% live at home with both parents, 15% live with only their mother, 1% live with only their father, and 2% live with others (including, but not limited to living with guardians, foster parents, in group homes, or on their own) (Zheng, 2019). Those living outside of a two-parent home faced disproportionality high suspension rates. Students who lived with only their mother, accounted for 32% of suspensions, and those that lived with only their fathers represented 4% of suspensions. Additionally, those that lived with neither parent, accounted for 5% of suspensions (Zheng, 2019).

Furthermore, parental education and occupation were noticeable underlying variables in students who were suspended. Students who have a parent who holds a university degree or above (57%) accounted for only 32% of suspensions (Zheng, 2019). Students whose parent(s) had a college diploma (15%), secondary school or less (15%), and those who were unsure (9%)
accounted for 24%, 22% and 22% of suspensions respectively (Zheng, 2019). Parental occupation was also a factor that contributed to uneven suspension rates. Students whose parent(s) worked as a semi- or high professional, or in middle/senior management occupation accounted for 55% of the student body, and 37% of suspensions (Zheng, 2019). Conversely, those students who had parents who did not work, or who were unskilled or semi-skilled workers accounted for 35% of the student body, and 62% of suspensions (Zheng, 2019). This information from the TDSB suggests that students coming from a home where they do not live with both parents, have low parental educational attainment, and lower parental occupational status, are at higher risk for being suspended.

**Summary**

It is evident that there can be a multitude of underlying factors that can contribute to one’s risk of being suspended, and that different groups of people face much higher suspension rates. Males, those with learning disabilities and other exceptionalities related to externalizing behaviour, Black and Indigenous students, those that speak English, Arabic or Somali at home, students not living with both parents and students who come from homes with lower occupational status and lower education are all at a heightened risk for being suspended (Zheng, 2019; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Additionally, research has shown that the cumulative effect of risk factors for suspension may be great (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Losen and Gillespie (2012) found that students who were Black, male and had a disability were at the highest risk for suspension when compared to any other group or individual category. On the contrary, there were factors that appeared to be protective in terms of suspension. Being female, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, or white, coming from two parent homes, homes with high parental educational attainment, and high employment status were all
associated with lower suspension rates (Zheng, 2019; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Finally, the risk factors and protective factors listed in this section that are associated with suspension rates are of little or no control for the student themselves. For most, the factors are of circumstance, such as language spoken at home, parental occupation, race, and gender. Much of the research on student suspension focuses on factors external to the student.

**Self-Regulation and Suspensions**

There are many external factors that can be considered a risk factor for being suspended that are well researched. However, factors such as gender, race, or familial situation are outside the control of the student. This warrants consideration of internal, and individual factors that may also be associated with high suspension rates.

According to Dr. Stuart Shanker, self-regulation (SR) is the practice of reducing the frequency and intensity of strong impulses by managing stress-load and recovery (2016). SR includes the ability to monitor and modify one’s own emotions and behaviours, and to ignore distracting stimuli. Having the skills to SR can help students be successful in the classroom. However, SR skill development continues until age 25 (Steinberg et al., 2017). Furthermore, Steinberg et al., (2017) found that sensation seeking impulses and behaviours increased during adolescence and peaked around age 19. This means during the period of adolescence, even the most well-adapted teen is managing a period of high sensation seeking impulses with an underdeveloped capacity for SR. Additionally, adolescence is a period of life where youth begin to manage increasing responsibilities, and subsequently receive less adult supervision. This information about SR may help to explain the jump in suspension rates from 1.87% in elementary school students to 5.02% in secondary school students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020).
Furthermore, King et al. (2013) found that adolescents who had slower SR skill development, displayed a series of concerning behaviours. The adolescents who were behind their peers in terms of SR skill development were found to struggle more with externalizing and internalizing behaviour, substance use, empathy, social relationships, and academic performance. Externalizing behaviour, as related to slower SR development may put these adolescents at higher risk of suspension. King, et al. (2013) also found that the adolescents that had a lower level of SR skills came from homes where parenting styles were more likely to be coercive, punitive, and dismissive. Additionally, adolescents that had experienced stressful life events, and who had parents/guardian who were minimally involved in their lives, showed less developed SR skills (King et al., 2013). These findings suggest that the home environment may influence SR skill development, and the associated challenges, such as struggling with externalizing behaviour may make these adolescents more vulnerable to suspensions.

A mixed methods study by Buckner, Mezzacappa and Beardsless (2009) investigated how SR was related to adaptative functioning in low-income youth. Buckner, Mezzacappa and Beardsless (2009) found that low-income youth with low SR scores demonstrated more externalizing behaviour, had more contact with police, associated more with deviant peers, and were more likely to be suspended. Low-income youth who scored in the highest quartile percentage for SR did not exhibit these trends. The youth who were low-income and had low SR scores were also less socially competent, and had lower grade point averages (Buckner et al., 2009).

In the qualitative portion of Buckner et al’s. (2009) study, low-income youth with low SR scores were more likely to respond to hypothetical situations that were to be assumed negative in maladaptive ways. Those with high SR responded in an adaptive way 84% of the time whereas
those with low SR responded in an adaptive way only 51% of the time (Buckner et al., 2009).

The maladaptive responses shared by those with low SR were primarily categorized as demonstrations of defiance, and expression of negative emotions (Buckner et al., 2009).

Examples of adaptive and maladaptive responses can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful Hypothetical event</th>
<th>Adaptive Responses</th>
<th>Maladaptive Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother no longer wants child to see a close friend</td>
<td>“Talk to mom about her, introduce my mom to my friend.”</td>
<td>“Run away to one of my friend’s house to tell them what happened.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Talk to mom, tell mom that she is my best friend and I want to see her again, that we have a lot in common and do same things together.”</td>
<td>“Yell at her why not, I’d still go to her house.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Talk to mom about the problem, about being sad”</td>
<td>“Hang with him anyways.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Just play with him at school where the teachers watch, and not in the neighbourhood.”</td>
<td>“Tell her off, punch a hole through the door.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Maybe talk to the guidance counselor in school about the situation.”</td>
<td>“I’d demand I should see him, I would run away.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Let her forget and don’t say anything, then see them anyways”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Buckner et al. 2009)

The maladaptive responses from the youth who had low SR scores may help to explain why those with low SR may be more prone to being suspended. The maladaptive responses
offered more frequently by those with low SR could be perceived as disrespectful, defiant, or aggressive behaviour, and in a school context, could lead to a suspension. Based on the responses, it is conceivable that a benign comment or request from a teacher may escalate to a confrontation by a student’s maladaptive response that can be attributed to low SR. Additionally, it is understood that SR is stable across academic and non-academic contexts, and those that struggle with behaviour related to SR outside of school also struggle with SR within a school context (Purdie et al., 2004).

In summary, it appears that SR skills are an important factor in student behaviour. Low SR can lead to externalized behaviour, maladaptive responses, and more suspensions (Buckner et al., 2009; King et al., 2013). It is also understood that unstable home environments and stressful life circumstances can slow the development of SR skills, ultimately leading to problem behaviour (King et al., 2013). Additionally, Buckner et al. (2009) found that youth who came from low-income homes with low SR, frequently expressed maladaptive responses whereas that was not the case for youth from low-income homes with high SR. It is apparent that external and internal factors can contribute to an increased risk of suspension (Buckner et al., 2009; King et al., 2013; Zheng, 2019).

**Implications and Impacts of Suspensions**

In order to understand the impacts of suspensions, it is important to understand the implications of a suspension. In Ontario, suspensions are classified either as short-term (1-5 school days) or long-term (6-20 school days). All suspensions prohibit the student from attending or participating in any school sanctioned activity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). The length of suspension given by the principal determines what is required on behalf of the school and the suspended student. Students who receive short, or long-term suspensions are expected to
receive a homework package, and those on long-term suspensions are also required to meet with the principal and to be offered an academic support program to participate in while they are off on suspension. Each school board is required to have an academic support program that is accessible to students who are suspended from their board. Attendance for the program, which must be offered to students receiving long-term suspensions, is voluntary on the student’s behalf (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Once a long-term suspension is served, the student is required to have a re-entry meeting with the principal. For the longest suspensions ranging from 11-20 school days, in addition to the above, the principal must also offer a non-academic support component. The non-academic support component could include things such as anger-management or substance abuse counselling. Students are encouraged to participate (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018), though due to the voluntary nature of the academic and non-academic supports, information regarding frequency of attendance, and how time was spent during suspension is not publicly available.

Most suspensions issued in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) are short-term and are one to five days in length (89%) (Zheng, 2019). Long-term suspensions ranging from 6-10 days and 11-20 days are far less frequent and are issued only 5% and 6% of the time respectively (Zheng, 2019). In the TDSB, 28% of suspensions are given for reasons under the category of breaching the school’s code of conduct. This code of conduct varies from school to school and covers minor infractions not explicitly listed in the Education Act (Zheng, 2019). Fighting, physical assault not requiring medical attention and swearing at a person in a position of authority are the next most common reasons for suspension at 18%, 15%, and 6% respectively (Zheng, 2019).
It is often claimed that suspensions are used to maintain a safe learning environment for students and staff, and to deter misbehaviour (Nichols, 2004). The removal of a student from the school environment may make the school space temporarily safer, however, the literature shows misbehaviour is not being deterred (Nichols, 2004). In a meta-analysis by Nichols (2004), there was no clear existing evidence that suggested suspensions deterred future student misbehaviour and suspensions. In the TDSB, 25% of all students who get suspended, are suspended more than once in the given academic year (Zheng, 2019). It is unknown how many times one individual may be suspended during their academic career as the Ontario Ministry of Education reports and the TDSB only releases statistics on a year-to-year basis. Additionally, Nichols (2004) found school suspensions were related with academic failure, negative school attitudes, dropping out, lower subsequent school attendance and less participation in extracurricular activities. It is evident that youth who are being suspended are being disengaged from school, are at higher risk for subsequent suspensions and are receiving a clear message of rejection (Nichols, 2004; Zheng, 2019).

Moreover, suspensions have been found to have a lasting negative impact on youth that go far beyond their academic year (Rosenbaum, 2018; Wolfe & Kupchik, 2017). Rosenbaum’s (2018) research found that five years after a youth was suspended, they were less likely to have earned a secondary school diploma, were far less likely to be attending post-secondary education and were 40% more likely to be arrested than their never-suspended peers. Similar findings were noted when Rosenbaum (2018) investigated the impacts 12 years after a suspension. It was also found that with each subsequent suspension, the likelihood of secondary school graduation decreased (Rosenbaum, 2018). Failure to graduate from secondary school is associated with
negative social and economic consequences, including lower employment rates compared to peers with a secondary school diploma (Uppal, 2017).

A longitudinal study by Wolfe and Kupchik (2017), investigated the impacts of suspension and found similar relationships between suspensions and later in life outcomes as Rosenbaum (2018) found. Wolfe and Kupchik’s (2017) findings showed that 14 years after being suspended from middle or secondary school, adults were more likely to have been involved in criminal activity or be incarcerated, even after controlling for academic performance, achievement, juvenile delinquency, drug use and other factors such as mental health. Results also showed that adults who were previously suspended from middle or secondary school, were 22% more likely to have been the victims of crime (Wolfe & Kupchik, 2017).

The practice of exclusionary discipline not only reduces instructional time for students, it also removes a student from a structured environment. Although academic programs are offered to those students on long-term suspensions, attendance is not required. Some school board-based academic programs only operate for a portion of the typical school day. For example, The Positive Alternative Student Support program that is offered by the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board only operates between the hours of 8:30 am and 12:30 pm (Community Organized Support and Prevention, 2019). In this instance, even if a student attended the Positive Alternative Student Support program, the student would still be denied access to a structured school environment for hours each day. For students who are being suspended for risky or impulsive behaviour, the lack of a structured and supervised environment may exacerbate their troublesome behaviour.

Finally, in terms of Ontario Secondary School academic and credit achievement, students who have been suspended obtain less credits than expected and have less success on provincially
administered assessments (Zheng, 2019). In the TDSB, only 30% of students who have been suspended achieve adequate scores on the grade nine Education Quality and Accountability Office’s (EQAO) math assessment. This is compared to 71% of students achieving adequate scores who have not been suspended (Zheng, 2019). Furthermore, only 16% of those who have been suspended twice or more achieve adequate scores on the same grade 9 EQAO math assessment (Zheng, 2019). In terms of credit accumulation, TDSB students who have been suspended struggle to obtain the standard number of credits needed to work towards graduation on a yearly basis (Zheng, 2019). In the TDSB, only 32% of grade ten students who had been suspended in the academic year received the expected number of credits for grade ten. Of students who had been suspended more than once in that year, only 9% achieved the expected number of credits. This is compared to 76% of students who were not suspended that achieved the expected number of credits (Zheng, 2019).

The literature highlights the harmful effects of suspension (Rosenbaum, 2018). In the short term, suspensions reduce instructional time, remove the student from a structured environment, actively disengage the student from their school community and increases their risk of being suspended again (Nichols, 2004; Zheng, 2019). In the TDSB, suspensions are also related to lower academic achievement and less credit accumulation (Zheng, 2019). Long term impacts are also detrimental and have been shown to include low educational attainment, increased criminal activity, higher rates of criminal victimization, and a lower likelihood of completing secondary school (Rosenbaum, 2018; Wolfe & Kupchik, 2017). A large metanalysis of school suspensions and student outcomes by Noltemeyer et al. (2015) did not find any evidence that suspensions are helpful to students. Noltemeyer et al’s. (2015) metanalysis found that suspensions were associated with poorer academic outcomes, and an increased likelihood of
a student dropping out of school. It is well known that the lack of a secondary school diploma is a momentous barrier to future employment, income, and health (Lansford et al., 2016; Stark & Noel, 2015; Uppal, 2017) With suspensions being associated with such devastating consequences, it is imperative that other alternatives to suspension are explored.

**Alternatives to Suspension**

As the concern for the use of exclusionary discipline has grown over the years, there is a growing amount of literature reviewing alternative practises to address school discipline. Benjamin Franklin’s famous words of wisdom “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is relevant in schools as well. Schools that create communities with supportive adults and engaged learners prevent more behavioural issues from occurring (Emmer & Sabornie, 2014).

In terms of prevention strategies, many avenues could be explored. Research shows that youth of colour are issued a disproportionate number of suspensions, and according to Skiba and colleagues (2002), increasing the cultural competence and sensitivity of educators seems to be a valuable course of action. Skiba et al. (2002) found that black youth were more likely to be referred to the office for subjective behaviours such as disrespect, excessive noise, and posing a threat. On the contrary, white students were more likely to be referred to the office for less subjective acts, such as smoking, use of obscene language, and vandalism. It is conceivable that increasing cultural competence in educators may help reduce office referrals for black youth simply by reframing the observed behaviour. Positive teacher-student relationships are often deemed to be the foundation of classroom and academic success, but little empirical research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of cultural competency programs for teachers in an effort reduce the disproportionate discipline for black youth (Dupper et al., 2009).
Although cultural and sensitivity training for educators may help to address disparities in school discipline, the strategy does not address the broader use of exclusionary discipline. School-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) has been a proactive approach that has been increasingly adopted and moderately successful at addressing behavioural problems in elementary schools (Sugai & Anderson, 2009). SWPBS is considered a strategy that sets behavioural expectations school wide, and has the students, educators and administration all agreeing to its implementation. The aim is to teach social, emotional, behavioural, and academic skills to all students and use a three-tiered approach of guidance to offer extra interventions to students who need more support.

At the secondary school level, SWPBS has not been implemented and researched as frequently as in elementary schools. A study by Flannery, Sugai and Anderson (2009) aimed to investigate the effectiveness of SWPBS at the secondary level and found schools had unique challenges when compared to their elementary counterparts that impacted their success. The most commonly reported challenge for implementing SWPBS at the secondary level was the large number of staff that needed to be trained and included in the program. Secondary schools tend to have more students and staff than elementary schools, making it more difficult to implement an approach like SWPBS. Additionally, slightly less than half of staff respondents from secondary schools with SWPBS reported implementing the strategies aimed at positively reinforcing student behaviours. A troubling concern given that an 80% staff “buy in” is typically suggested for success (Flannery et al., 2009). SWPBS was more effective in reducing further suspensions compared to using suspensions alone in a secondary school context despite implementation challenges (Flannery et al., 2009).
A relatively common practise used by some schools as an intervention, particularly in the United States to counter high suspension rates, is issuing in-school-suspension (Cholewa et al., 2018). In-school-suspensions differ from suspensions because they do not prohibit the offending student from going to school. Instead, the student must still attend school daily, but they are removed from their classes. In-school-suspensions sometimes entirely replace suspensions or are sometimes used for less severe infractions. In-school-suspensions vary with each school in terms of supports offered to the students and what is expected of the student during the day(s) of an in-school-suspension (Cholewa et al., 2018). Using data from a nationally representative study, Cholewa et al. (2018) found that schools using in-school-suspensions still had racial and disability disparities similar to other out-of-school suspension studies. The study also found that students who received in-school-suspensions were still at greater risk of dropping out and had lower grade point averages (Cholewa et al., 2018).

In Ontario, the Progressive Discipline and School Safety Act and the associated Progressive Discipline policy that were adopted in 2007 and 2009 respectively, were intended to address issues with exclusionary practices (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, progressive discipline policies are intended to allow principals to determine appropriate consequences and or supports to help improve student behaviour (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). In practise, the TDSB follows up suspensions with interventions 96% of the time (Zheng, 2019). Interventions are loosely defined, and the technique most often used is contacting the parent/guardian, which occurs 32% of the time. The use of interventions that involve guidance teams (14%), social workers (12%), or restorative practices (9%) are much less frequent (Zheng, 2019).
There is a growing desire to reduce or eliminate suspensions, but not enough is being done to protect our most vulnerable students (Milne and Aurini, 2017). More than 30,000 students are suspended from Ontario public schools each year and leaving them perhaps more vulnerable than they were before being suspended (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019).

**Related Research: Student Voices**

Much of the research that has been conducted on school suspensions has been quantitative, but a few studies have focused qualitatively on the voices of those who are being suspended (Bell, 2020; Gibson et al., 2014). A study by Bell (2020) sought to understand the experiences and perceptions that Black students, and parents of Black students have about suspensions. Bell (2020) recruited 30 Black students who had been suspended at least once, and 30 parents whose Black children had been suspended at least once in the state of Michigan. Bell conducted a 60-90-minute, semi-structured interview with each individual to hear about their experiences and perceptions of suspension. Of the 30 student participants, 26 expressed that they felt that school discipline was unfair. The two reasons stated were, 1) they felt the punishment was excessive in response to the behaviour, and 2) they felt as though their voice, and side of the story was not heard. The parents who were interviewed also felt negatively towards suspensions and highlighted the barriers they felt they faced when trying to advocate for their children, and particularly those with disabilities (Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder was most frequently referenced). Lastly, it was found that boys, from low socioeconomic backgrounds were most likely to report that they felt their voices were disregarded. There is limited peer-reviewed and strictly qualitative research conducted with student who have been suspended, and of those limited studies, they tend to focus on Black American students (Bell, 2020; Gibson et al., 2014;
Kayama et al., 2015). Although these are important voices to be heard, it limits a broader understanding of suspensions from various perspectives.

Quin and Hemphill (2014) conducted a study using questionnaires to understand students’ perspectives and experiences of being suspended. Although this was a quantitative study, it produced meaningful results on how students perceive and experience suspension. The questionnaires were completed by 74 previously suspended adolescent students from Australia. Anger was the most common emotional response that participants felt when they learned they were being suspended, and 62% of participants reported that their parents reacted with anger towards them after learning of their suspension. During the days that a student was suspended, only a minority of participants reported that they were supervised by an adult. Upon their return to class, the majority of participants said teachers did not help them catch up on missed work, and 43% of participants said that overall, their teachers were more reluctant to help them. Lastly, 42% of students responded that their suspension helped “not at all; I will be suspended again”. The study concluded that suspensions could lead to feelings of anger, stigma upon returning to school, reduced supervision during suspensions and ultimately disengaged students.

**Self-Efficacy as a Conceptual Framework**

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1997), is described as one’s belief in their own ability to perform an activity to achieve a certain outcome. The belief of an ability one holds of themselves affects their current, and future performance in such activities. According to Bandura (1991), self-efficacy means if one believes they have an ability to perform a task, they will be more likely to attempt, and to achieve a desired outcome for the task. In an academic context, students who believe they can succeed demonstrate higher levels of engagement, have higher expectations of themselves, and put forth more effort and are more persistent in difficult tasks.
(Bandura, 1997). Additionally, students with a stronger sense of self-efficacy are more willing to participate in challenging activities and ultimately develop more competence (Pajares & Schunk, 2005). On the contrary, students with low self-efficacy are less engaged, put forth less effort, and are less willing to persist with challenges (Bandura, 1997; Pajares & Schunk, 2005). Furthermore, in a study by Bouffard-Bouchard and colleagues (1991), results showed self-efficacy had a significant influence on a student’s ability to self-regulate in an academic context. According to Buckner et al. (2009), a student’s weakened ability to self-regulate was found to be a risk factor for suspension.

As hypothesized by Bandura (1997), there are four sources to one’s self-efficacy beliefs: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasions, and emotional and physiological states. Mastery experience is how one interprets their performance on a given task. When someone feels they did well, their self-efficacy beliefs about accomplishing another similar or related task increases. On the other hand, when someone believes they did poorly on a task, their self-efficacy beliefs about their potential for success with a similar task is reduced (Usher & Pajares, 2006). The role of vicarious experiences in self-efficacy is related to the closeness and similarity ones feels towards a peer they are observing. If a student is watching a closely related peer perform a specific task, the peer’s success or failure can impact the other student’s feeling of self-efficacy for the task (Usher & Pajares, 2006). For example, a peer’s success on a task can convince an uncertain student that they too may be able to have success. The opposite effect is also possible, and a peer’s failure can sway an uncertain individual away from attempting a task (Usher & Pajares, 2006). The influence of vicarious experiences can also come from role models, such as parents, relatives, or mentors. A role model’s successes or failures and own their levels of self-efficacy can also influence the mentee (Usher & Pajares, 2006; Bandura, 1997).
Social persuasion, the third source of self-efficacy, is information that is received from others. Encouragement from teachers, parents, mentors, and peers can help to boost one’s belief of self-efficacy to successfully complete a task (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Perhaps more impactful though, is the ability for social persuasion to reduce one’s sense of self-efficacy through put-downs, criticism, and humiliation (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Lastly self-efficacy can be influenced by how one interprets their own emotional and physiological states (Usher & Pajares, 2006). For example, the feeling of “butterflies” before a challenging task may leave someone believing that they are incompetent and may lead them to avoid the task (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

In terms of student suspensions, self-efficacy will be an important conceptual framework to help understand the experiences of those who have been suspended. Since self-efficacy is one’s own perception of one’s abilities and interpretation of their experiences, it will be an important lens to view, and understand one’s experience with suspension. A participant’s narrative of their perceived ability to complete tasks commonly considered to be valuable in school may help to create more meaning from their experiences with suspension.

**Explanatory framework**

Although self-efficacy theory played an important in the development of my thesis, after the interviews and analysis, it became apparent that there was another framework that would better help to explain and make sense of the participants’ experiences. I used a self-efficacy framework to inform many of my third interview questions and it led to great discussion. The information gathered on the participants feelings of self-efficacy was informative but did not help to explain the participants lived experience in a way that honoured their stories. In response, I used a framework by K. Williams (2009) that focuses on the human experience of ostracism. This model helped to explain the experiences of the participants in a way that recognized their
significant challenges with feeling a sense of belonging. This explanatory framework will be introduced in more depth in the fifth chapter.

**Summary**

As schools have perpetually struggled with challenging student behaviour, it is apparent many issues still exist (Public Agenda, 2004b). The use of exclusionary discipline, namely suspensions, were used with little discretion due to the zero-tolerance policy in the *Safe Schools Act*, in the late 90’s and early 00’s (Winton, 2013). Not long after, the Ontario Human Rights Council filed a complaint and by 2007, it was mandated that all reference to zero-tolerance was to be removed from ministry documents (Winton, 2013). Zero-tolerance was replaced with use of professional discretion from educators when deciding on disciplinary measures (Winton, 2013). Nevertheless, most recent data shows over 31,000 secondary school students are suspended each year, representing 4.8% of the secondary school body (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). The 4.8% of secondary students being suspended each year far exceeds the 0.5% of students expelled suggesting there is only a very small number of students who cannot be integrated in their schools because of their behaviour (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). It is indicative that the behaviours that result in 4.8% of students being suspended are not beyond the schools’ capacity and therefore are not warranted.

Furthermore, the students being suspended are not equally represented in the schools. Males, Black students, and students with learning disabilities are overrepresented in suspensions (Bauermeister et al., 2007; Bender, 2008; McNamara & Willoughby, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019; Zheng, 2019). It has also been found that students coming from unstable home environments experience higher rates of suspensions (King et al., 2013; Zheng, 2019). Although it is not fully understood, it appears that there is a cumulative effect with each additional risk
factor for suspension (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Losen and Gillespie (2012) found that Black males with a disability were far more at risk for being suspended than any other grouping. It is also understood that self-regulation has a role in suspensions risk and is also associated with an unstable home environment (Buckner et al., 2009; King et al., 2013). Students who experienced stressful life events, coercive or punitive parental discipline, and parental rejection showed slower development of self-regulation, which was also related to youth struggling with externalizing behaviour (King et al., 2013). Additionally, adolescents who had low self-regulation relative to their peers, reacted to stressful hypothetical situations in aggressive, defiant, and maladaptive ways (Buckner et al., 2009). Together, these findings suggest that both extrinsic and intrinsic factors play a role in a student’s suspension risk.

Moreover, the negative impacts suspensions have on students are far-reaching. Students who are suspended lose instructional time, have lower academic achievement, are more likely to be suspended again, and are less likely to complete secondary school (Zheng, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2018; Nichols, 2004). In longitudinal studies, the impact of suspensions has been found to have long term, negative consequences. These include increased risk of incarceration, low educational attainment, and increased risk of being victims of crimes (Rosenbaum, 2018; Wolfe & Kupchik, 2017).

It is widely recognized in the literature that suspensions disproportionately effect vulnerable populations and do more harm than good, yet exclusionary discipline is still commonly used (Bauermeister et al., 2007; Bender, 2008; McNamara & Willoughby, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019; Zheng, 2019). In Ontario, each school is mandated to have a progressive discipline policy, but approximately one in every 21 secondary school students are still suspended each year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). Some prevention based and
intervention-based strategies have been studied to manage behavioural problems in schools, but there is little evidence of a strategy that is truly effective and can be generalizable to a large scale (Cholewa et al., 2018; Dupper et al., 2009; Flannery et al., 2009).

Finally, the phenomenon of suspension is a complex issue that has many variables and may only be truly understood on a deeply personal and individual level. To understand the experience one has had, self-efficacy as a lens will help to unpack one’s experiences in school and the impacts of being suspended. Interpretation of one’s experiences influence one’s self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy can be understood through four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). The four sources of self-efficacy are embedded into the day-to-day activities of school, and can have lasting impacts, either positive or negative, on students. Additionally, the self-efficacy beliefs one holds about their capabilities also inform their choices and reinforces the belief they have, whether it be low or high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).
Chapter 3
Methodology and Methods

In this chapter I describe the reasoning for using a qualitative research methodology. I specifically describe the purpose of the narrative inquiry approach and then, in detail I outline the specific research methods for this study. Lastly, I discuss trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to capture the voices of youth who have been suspended during their secondary school years and make meaning of their experience. To focus on the voice of the participants and their experiences, a narrative approach to inquiry was used. I sought to hear the lived experience of those have been suspended and gain understanding from their stories. According to Clandinin (2013), lived experience is an important source of knowledge and can be shared through stories. van Manen (1990) also stated that by allowing others to tell their stories without constraints, untold stories come to the surface and allows outside individuals to see what was once hidden. In understanding stories, researchers are able to connect individual experiences, across time and place, to other people’s experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although individuals’ experiences are all unique, narrative inquiry allows the researcher to better understand the participants’ shared experiences and complex phenomena.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narratives as having three principles: temporality, sociality, and place. The principle of temporality means that experiences cannot be understood in isolation. Experiences have a past (when it happened), present (how it is perceived now), and a future. Future experiences are influenced by past experiences, and lead to further experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The principle of sociality recognizes that the
interactions and relationships between the self and others are critical pieces to a narrative. An experience cannot be understood without acknowledging the social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Lastly, the principle of place describes that the physical context in which a story takes place is necessary to understand the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Understanding the landscape and the physical nature of the places where one’s story takes place provides context that helps provide meaning. The consideration of the three principles of temporality, sociality and place is what makes narrative inquiry a distinct and valuable methodology for qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To understand the three principles of this narrative approach, the researcher must consider asking the participant to look inwards toward their own feelings, reactions and conditions, and ask the participants to look outwards and share their thought on how they perceive the social environment around them. Researchers must also encourage the participants to reflect on their memories of events, and how their reactions and feelings have been evolved over time. Looking towards the future and understanding a participants’ perceived pathways is also imperative. Lastly, understanding the physical environments in which their stories occurred is important to better understand ones’ experience.

Throughout a narrative inquiry, it is imperative that the process is collaborative between the participant and the researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To act in a collaborative way, the researcher must give power to the participants to share their experiences from their perspectives as experts on their own lives, and the freedom to include, exclude or embellish their stories. The power given to the participants is done by giving the participant time and space to answer and encouraging them to bring their own topics to the interview. The researcher frequently checks understanding with the participant by summarizing what they have shared to
clarify meaning and following up with further questions. The interview process is dynamic and allows for the participant to move amongst the past, present and future. The researcher’s role is then to share the stories in such a way that will allow readers to view the participants’ experiences from the lens of which they have lived their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of a narrative inquiry is not to uncover the truth, but rather to understand how an individual perceives their own experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The results from a narrative inquiry then are a construction of both the participant’s and researcher’s experiences and understandings of the stories shared (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

I recruited participants that were between the ages of 18 and 24 and had been suspended at least once during their time in a publicly funded Ontario secondary school. The age range of 18 to 24 years old was chosen to recruit youth who could consent to research without parental permission and to hear the stories of those who would have been in secondary school when the current Progressive Discipline policy was in use. For reference, the 2009-2010 academic year was the first entire school year where each school board was required to have a Progressive Discipline Policy. This policy followed the Safe Schools Act that mandated “zero-tolerance” to removed from all policy documents and gave principals more autonomy regarding the decision to suspend students (Bill 212, 20017). People over the age of 24 would have been in secondary school while zero-tolerance policies were in use and were restricted from participating. I was looking for three to five participants as the emphasis of qualitative research is on rich data, as opposed to high numbers of participants (Plano Clark & Cresswell, 2015). Recruitment sites included adult and continuing education schools, youth social service organizations and online
communities. The selected recruitment locations were considered a form of intensity sampling as the aim was to find participants that are rich with information. The intensity sampling was informed by relevant data that highlights the struggles youth who have experienced suspensions face. I recruited from organizations that were more likely to serve those who have been suspended rather than general public areas or services (i.e., the grocery store). Participants who would be considered information rich would be those who have been greatly impacted by their suspension(s) and have an emotional response to their school experiences. Those who have struggled in and out of school but are trying to improve their circumstances would also make for information rich participants. Lastly, it was imperative that participants felt as though they wanted their voices to be heard.

To recruit participants at my selected locations, I contacted the program supervisors and informed them of my study. I asked permission to leave my recruitment flyers at their sites. The flyers described the research study and invited potential participants to contact me via email or phone. The flyer summarized the research as investigating youths’ experiences with suspensions, and described how there would be three interviews, up to 60 minutes in length, and participants would be compensated with a $15 grocery store gift card at each interview. One program supervisor at a youth agency invited me to attend their morning drop-in period. The program supervisor casually introduced me at the drop in, and some youth expressed interest in the study. One participant in the study came from this organization. I also gave permission to this participant to recommend others he may know that maybe interested (an application of snowball sampling). There was interest from three other youth at this location, but they were either younger than 18, or did not follow up. I did not hear back from any potential participants at sites where I simply I left recruitment flyers at. I then turned to the internet and posted on a local
Reddit page. I included my flyer and contact information. I was contacted by two people from Reddit who were interested but were ineligible because they were older than 24. One person contacted me, saying he knew people who might be interested and referred them to my study. This is how I became connected with my second and third participants. I exchanged texts with these participants and arranged times to meet with them individually. Each individual was screened to meet the inclusion criteria and the letter of information was read to them. Each participant was made aware of the potential risks involved and consented to participating. Each participant was offered a $15 gift card at each interview to a local grocer of their choosing (total of $45 over three interviews).

Had there been interest from more participants than intended, I was prepared to select those who would have rich information. To assess richness, I would send an email to those interested and request some basic information to better understand the people’s potential for richness. Such questions would have included the number of times suspended, highest level of academic achievement, current student or employment status, and availability for length of study (two to six months). The selection would be informed by the relevant details that describe those greatly impacted by suspension(s).

**Participant Descriptions**

The three participants that were involved in this study are Ethan, Jax, and Caleb. All participants were currently residing in the same, medium-sized city. At the time of the study, Ethan was 23, homeless, and had recently put his university program on hold. Ethan was raised by his grandparents until he entered the foster care system at 15. Ethan then lived in group homes and in a family placement until he moved out on his own at 17. At this time, Ethan was working towards graduating secondary school, and working full time hours. Ultimately, he dropped out of
school because he could not financially afford to lose hours at work. Ethan returned to an alternative education program two years later and graduated secondary school. He was completed approximately two years worth of college and university since. Jax was 20 years old at the time of our interviews and was recently released from a local detention centre. Jax was raised by his biological mother until he was nine years old, at which time he was placed in a foster home. The foster family later became Jax’s adoptive family. Once Jax turned 18, he stopped attending school and he did not graduate with his secondary school diploma. Lastly, Caleb was 18 at the time of our interviews and was nearly finished with secondary school. Caleb had already graduated secondary school but returned for an extra semester to better prepare himself for college. Caleb’s family is the family that adopted Jax, the other participant. Although Caleb and Jax are not biologically related, they shared a home and the same family structure for many years and refer to each other as brothers. Table 4 briefly summarizes the participants demographics.

Table 4

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Current Circumstance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jax</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Secondary School Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants represented some of the groups of people who are suspended at disproportionate rates. All of the participants were male and had ADHD. Jacob also identified he has a specific learning disability. Ethan and Jax were raised in less than two parent homes, were involved in the
foster care system. Being male, having a special education designation, and living in a less than two parent home are all categories of people who are overrepresented in school suspension (Zheng, 2019). On the contrary, none of the participants identified as Black. Those who identify as Black are suspended at a disproportionately higher rates than their non-Black peers (Zheng, 2019). The geographic area in which I recruited participants is considered a predominately white, mid sized city in Eastern Ontario. People who identify as Black represent less than 2% of the population in the city which I recruited from (Statistics Canada, 2017). In the Toronto District School Board, where much of the demographic data of suspended students comes from, Black students represent 11% of the population (Zheng 2019).

**Interviews**

**Location details**

Interviews were conducted in mutually agreed upon spaces. I wanted to conduct interviews at a place that would be comfortable and accessible to the participants based on their form of transportation. I conducted interviews with my first participant at the youth organization we met at. This was a place Ethan frequented, and was accessible and familiar to him. I offered for us to find a quiet space in the building, but for our first interview, Ethan opted to stay in the common area. In our subsequent interviews, Ethan chose for us to use a more private space in the building. I interviewed the two other participants at coffee shops accessible to them. The coffee shops were both predominantly used by seniors, and it was unlikely we would cross paths with their friends or acquaintances. The dates and times we met were mutually decided upon. To set an interview date and time, I communicated a few potential dates, and what my general availability was (i.e., morning, afternoon, evening). I then let the participant choose what worked best for them.
**Interview process**

Prior to beginning the first interview, each participant was made aware of the details of the study, including possible risks, and signed the informed consent forms. Each participant was made aware that they were able to quit the study and/or interview and understood how they could do so. Participants could verbally inform me if they wanted to stop the interview. The participants were also provided with both my contact information and my supervisors. Participants could contact me or my supervisor via email or phone to express their desire to quit the study if they wished. Participants were told they were not under any obligation to answer any questions. Prior to starting an interview, we would engage in small talk and I would remind the participants they were free to leave the interview at any point. I gave the $15 gift card to the grocery store of their choosing prior to beginning the interviews. The interviews were all digitally recorded on a portable recording device, and I also jotted notes in my journal. I explicitly informed participants when the recorder was being turned on and off. I had planned to distribute an interview protocol to each participant, via email, in advance that include open-ended questions and topics that may be explored in the interviews. However, none of the participants expressed interest in this, and had limited ability to receive documents via email. The participants all seemed to favour a less formal approach to the research. We communicated predominantly in person, or via text messaging (SMS).

**Interview details**

Each interview was semi-structured and followed three separate themes (see Appendix A). The first interview focused on their current circumstances. I asked open-ended questions to understand what the participant’s current day-to-day activities were and to learn about their journey they have had since graduating or leaving secondary school. The second interview
focused on the participant’s stories about their suspensions and their feelings towards the experiences. Lastly, the third interview focused on their earlier experiences in school and the connections of their experiences to self-efficacy. The questions regarding self-efficacy were guided by the four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and, emotional and physiological states.

At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share any other stories they felt were important. Some participants welcomed this opportunity and shared more pieces of their story. Throughout the interviews, I jotted short notes in my journal to add richness that could not be captured through audio-recording to assist in the meaning making process (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). I noted things such as hand gestures, body language and facial expressions. After each interview, I reflected and journaled about the process.

A participant’s second and third interview were spaced at a minimum one week apart. This timeline was used to allow both me and the participant to reflect on the interview before continuing, and to allow me time to transcribe the interview. The subsequent interview questions were adjusted and tailored to each individual while maintaining a similar structure. The adjustment was made to allow space for follow up questions and to revisit previous discussions. At the end of each interview, I stopped the recording device and thanked the participant for their time. If it was our first or second interview, we planned when we would meet next. I let the participants know I would be sending them an email in the next few days that included the transcript of the interview.

To maintain trust and positive rapport between myself and the participants, and to accurately present their stories, they were encouraged to be active participants throughout the data collection and analysis process. I invited each participant to bring their ideas forward, and I
frequently followed up during interviews to ensure I was understanding what they were saying. After completing an interview, a follow up email was sent to the participant to thank them for their time and included a copy of the transcript. The participants were invited to participate in member checking and were prompted with the following three questions; 1) Does the transcript accurately reflect what you said and meant? 2) Do you want to remove anything? 3) Do you want to add or change anything? The email was sent prior to conducting the participant’s subsequent interview. The participants verbally confirmed they had received the emails but did not reply to any emails. There were no changes made to the transcripts.

**Data management**

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and privacy. All participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonym, but no one expressed interest, therefore I assigned each pseudonym. Identifying features in the narratives, such as the names of people, towns or schools were also changed to protect privacy (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were all downloaded and saved on to a password protected laptop and a password protected USB. All interviews were then transcribed verbatim by me and saved as encrypted documents. All hard copy documents, including signed letters of consent, transcripts and researcher notes were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home.

**Data analysis**

To assist in analyzing the data, the software program *NVivo* was used. Constant comparative analysis was used to inductively form codes, categories, and then themes that represent similar meanings (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). For analysis, I combined all three of a participants’ interviews into one document to analyse. In total, I had one document per participant. During the second and third interviews, the conversations often circled back to topics
discussed in previous interviews. For this reason, the interview data was amalgamated into one document per participant. The participants data were all analysed independently of one another’s. The data was also paired with the field notes from the respective interviews. I used open coding following the initial read of the transcripts and “clipped” units of meaning which usually took the form of sentences. These “clipped” units were isolated from the transcript and a descriptive label was attached. These descriptive labels were my codes. I re-read the transcripts to look for missed codes, and then I grouped similar codes into categories. Lastly, I used thematic coding to create themes that further summarized the categories. The themes that emerged connected the participants unique experiences through place, time and relationships. These emergent themes were indicative of further literature that needed to be read, understood, and applied to help make meaning of the participants lived experiences.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are considered the cornerstones of trustworthy research (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). Dependability in my study is reflected in the audit trail. The audit trail, which includes field notes, research journal, transcripts, and detailed research methods demonstrates transparency. Access to this information would allow a replication of this study. This audit trail also aids in the transferability of this research. Although narrative research is not intended to be generalizable, the detailed description of methods and findings allows a researcher to replicate the study, or to assess if the findings are transferable to other, similar contexts (Holloway & Galvin, 2017).

In terms of credibility and qualitative research, it was important to ensure the findings accurately represent the participants’ experiences (Holloway & Galvin, 2017). To ensure this research was credible, I worked with participants who were remarkably familiar with
suspensions. The topic was relevant to their lives and experiences, and they were able to speak to many of their stories. I also encouraged member-checking by inviting the participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. In addition to this, I also used triangulation by revisiting topics in subsequent interviews and used field notes in conjunction with audio-recordings. I also practiced peer-review by maintaining communication with my supervisor (I.M.). As well, in the findings I present in Chapter 4, I frequently use participant quotes verbatim, so their voices are heard directly. Using direct quotes in my findings also builds confirmability. These verbatim quotes allow the reader to understand how themes emerged from the data (Holloway & Galvin, 2017).

My intentional strategies used to build dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability into my qualitative research work together to create trustworthy research. Diligent effort was made to re-tell the stories of the participants in way that reflects their subjective realities.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were emphasized throughout the study, in varying ways. Participant recruitment began only after receiving ethical clearance from Queen’s University Graduate Research and Ethics Board (GREB). I also submitted an amendment and waited for approval from GREB before making an adjustment to my recruitment methods. The amendment that I submitted allowed me to use snowball sampling with a current participant. Each participant was informed, verbally and in writing of the potential risks involved with this study which included potentially experiencing uncomfortable memories and strong emotional responses. Participants were provided with information for external resources for psycho-emotional support, including financially accessible supports, such as free mental health crisis lines. Participants were informed that a breach of confidentiality would only occur if mandated by law (e.g., duty to
report child abuse). Additionally, it was reiterated that participation was voluntary, and ending an interview or removing oneself from the study before completion can be done with no repercussions (e.g., they would still receive their $15 gift card). Verbal consent was received before turning on the recording device at each interview, and it was announced when the recorder was being turned off. The participants were encouraged to ask questions and had multiple means to communicate with me (text, phone, email, notes).
Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

The participants’ Ethan, Jax and Caleb, shared stories that were incredibly unique and concurrently extraordinarily similar. The participants were candid – boldly telling stories of painful experiences and excitedly sharing their accomplishments and aspirations. This chapter begins by introducing each participant by describing our first meeting to illustrate their personality, character traits, and most importantly, who they are as individuals. Then, a summary of their suspension history is presented to capture the extent and reasoning behind their suspensions. Lastly, I tell each participant’s stories through the themes that emerged from their respective interviews. Two themes, Aspirations and Ignored and Excluded emerged in all three participants’ narratives. The theme titled Aspirations centres on the hopes and dreams the participants shared. The participants all had a future they were working towards, and their aspirations were a central force in their lives. The theme titled Ignored and Excluded focuses on the participant experiences of feeling as though they do not belong. The participants shared how suspensions led to them feeling excluded, and how these feelings also manifested in other contexts in their lives. Ethan and Jax shared a common third theme, titled Childhood Adversity. The theme Childhood Adversity reflects the stories Ethan and Jax share of hardship during their early years, such as food insecurity, homelessness, and lack of caregiver support. The adversity emerged to be a prominent theme in their narratives. Lastly, Caleb’s third theme was unique to him. The theme titled High Parental Support and Expectations surfaced throughout his narrative. The theme High Parental Support and Expectations reflects Caleb’s commentary regarding the positive influence his parents had on him, specifically in the context of the school environment.
After all the participants’ narratives are presented, I speak to the themes in a broader sense to summarize the collective findings.

**Ethan**

As I sit at the youth-drop-in centre geared towards those who are experiencing homelessness, a young man name Ethan approaches me. He is taller than most and wears a large black coat, thick enough to keep him warm during the cooling autumn months. Ethan is hanging out for a few hours, where he has access to couches, internet, a kitchenette, and shelter. He is soft spoken but has a sense of unwavering confidence. He is interested in my research and we set up a day to meet again during drop-in hours for our first interview. Ethan has no phone – he owes a service provider too much money to have a phone plan again, so I just wait, hoping he shows up at our agreed upon time. I am feeling nervous, he is my first participant, and I am hoping it goes well. When Ethan shows up my nerves settle in his presence. We stay in the common area, perhaps it feels safer for Ethan to have others around us. Ethan is quick to share his current circumstances, which are unimaginably difficult. Just a few short months ago Ethan was about to enter his third year of his nursing degree, renting a room in a house and working in the culinary industry - something he previously went to college for. But Ethan’s sense of stability disappeared as quick as a rug being pulled out from under one’s feet. Now Ethan wakes up in a homeless shelter and he must leave the agency for most of the day until it re-opens at 5pm. Ethan heads down daily to the youth drop in to hang out and stay warm until it closes at noon. The rest of the day Ethan walks around to keep warm and makes sure he is back at the shelter for five o’clock, or he risks losing his bed. Ethan worries about the cooling weather and the challenges he knows all too well that come with homelessness. Ethan spent a large part of his childhood homeless and knows what it takes to stay warm in the cooling months without proper shelter. Ethan’s
grandparents were his guardians, but their struggles with substance abuse meant stable housing was a luxury that was not always afforded to him. Now Ethan is back on the streets taking it one day at a time, trying to get back to where he was just a few short months ago. As we part ways after the first interview, I just hope that he stays safe.

**History of suspensions and culmination of secondary school**

“I had a bunch of suspensions on my record, like a bunch so it was one of those things where they like look at me and they're all like oh well, whatever, like he’s just a trouble kid.”

Most of Ethan’s suspensions had to do with fighting. He struck me as a gentle person, but he was quick to attest to his overly reactive fight or flight response. Ethan light-heartedly shared “I remember my grandma used to joke and be like ‘I swear if a car was coming at you, you’ll try to punch it’. And I was like sadly yes [laughter].” Ethan claimed that he is not one to initiate fights, but is skilled in defending himself. His tall stature gave him an advantage, but also made him a target amongst his peers. Ethan explained “It’s just that I was a bigger person who wasn’t afraid to defend himself, so people saw that as a big target on my back”. Ethan initially began being suspended for fighting in early elementary school and the issue of fighting was never resolved. The fighting became more frequent in grade 7 and 8 and increased in severity in secondary school. Ethan’s fights with his peers were often physical, and his fights with teachers and staff were primarily verbal. Two particularly violent fights in secondary school with peers led to expulsions. Ethan’s first major violent fight resulted in an expulsion from the school, and the subsequent one resulted in Ethan being expelled from the entire school board. These expulsions meant that he missed months of secondary school on two separate occasions as a disciplinary measure. In addition to Ethan’s suspensions and expulsions for fighting, he was
suspended once in late elementary school for possession of drugs which also resulted in charges under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

Because of Ethan’s chaotic upbringing and no permanent place to call home, Ethan constantly changed schools. Despite “starting over” at new schools, Ethan never felt like he was able to start with a clean slate because he was known as a “troubled kid”. Ethan says, “as soon as people started seeing my track record like it got to the point where like sometimes like, you know, like being a kid like I’ll act up in class, I’ll just instantly get like suspended because my track record”. Not only was Ethan suspended from mainstream school, he was also barred from returning to an alternative education site for suspended students, again because of fighting.

Despite missing a significant amount of school days due to suspension, Ethan always did well academically. In fact, one of the only classes Ethan failed was due to extenuating circumstances, not lack of ability or motivation. At 17 Ethan moved out of his foster home and into his own apartment in a new town. He started at a new secondary school, the only school that he was never suspended from, and was working full time while also trying to balance secondary school and living on his own. Ultimately, he failed a class because of his work schedule – some shifts started before the end of the school day, and many shifts ended extremely late at night. It became impossible to remain a student and pay the bills. Ethan dropped out of secondary school to work, but he had intentions of returning the following semester. Returning to school was put on the backburner, but Ethan knew he needed to earn his diploma to be able to continue on to college. A couple years after leaving secondary school, Ethan attended an alternative school program to finish up his remaining credits.
Aspirations

Ethan has always worked hard, whether it be in school or in the workplace. Ethan is motivated by two goals he has held onto since he was a child – to get an education and to get out of poverty. As a child, Ethan was taken in by his grandparents after his mom disappeared (his father was never a part of Ethan’s life). Ethan’s grandparents abused substances and their addictions superseded meeting Ethan’s basic needs and drove them to divorce. Ethan was homeless for most of his childhood, alternating between staying in grandma’s car, and sleeping on grandma’s new boyfriends’ couches. This meant Ethan was never at one school for long and Ethan gave up on trying to make new friends. Ethan showed up at school everyday he could, motivated to get an education. Ethan explains how he took a message from his teachers very seriously saying:

I remember my teachers always saying like ‘if you do good in school, like you’ll get a good job’, and all that stuff and I just took that to heart and like, hey, I don’t want to be homeless when I’m older, just sick of living on the streets, sick of being poor, sick of not having anything to eat, sick of being cold.

Ethan asserted frequently throughout all our interviews that he showed up to school and worked hard with the sole intention of making a better life for himself. Ethan wanted to avoid becoming like his grandparents and made a very deliberate effort to avoid the same fate.

The environment Ethan grew up in was chaotic and lacked consistency. Nothing was ever handed to Ethan and he has always worked commendably hard to be successful. In school he worked for his future, taking his education very seriously, saying with maturity beyond his years, “I was there to you know learn, I wasn’t there to make friends”. Even when Ethan was suspended from school, he still managed to do his work. When Ethan returned from suspensions,
he would ask his peers for notes, use the internet to learn what he missed, and would request to write the tests that he was away for. Ethan was not going to let suspensions ruin his grades and ruin his path of leaving poverty behind him. Outside of school, Ethan worked hard to survive. He began working in the back of kitchens at 13 and panhandled to supplement his low wages. He needed money to eat, and his grandma could not be relied on. When the weather was cold, Ethan walked to the streets to stay warm. Ethan only had himself to depend upon. Ethan was determined to break the cycle and live a vastly different life.

Up until only a few months ago it seemed like Ethan was not only breaking the cycle but thriving. Ethan had worked in kitchens for years and did two years in college for culinary management, but felt his time was coming to an end in the industry. Ethan yearned for a more a more stable, and higher paying career. Ethan began school again, to become a nurse. He spoke about his desire to work in paediatrics, and his personality seemed well suited for such a job. As Ethan was about to enter his third year of nursing school this September, things spiraled leading him to become homeless yet again. Ethan was not able to secure funding to move back to the city where he was studying and pay tuition. He figured he would stay in the house he was currently renting a room in and continue to work in kitchens to save more money. However, Ethan’s roommate/landlord had different plans; the landlord wanted his own friend to move in and was harassing Ethan to get him to move. The landlord cut the power to Ethan’s room so his alarm would not wake him up for work, ate his food and changed the locks. Ethan had no choice but to leave. With vacancy rates extraordinarily low, Ethan was without a place to call home. This quickly led him to losing his job and has made finding a place to rent even more difficult. Ethan shared that he did not have a phone; he owed his old provider too much money and his credit score was too low to get another plan. Ethan expressed that he desperately wanted to work, and
that he is a skilled and dedicated employee, but now housing has become his priority. Ethan’s goal to become a nurse and to break the cycle of poverty have been temporarily stalled.

As we wrapped up our first interview, I asked Ethan out of curiosity how he found out about the youth organization that was hosting the drop-in we are at. Ethan explained how a few years back he worked for and was a youth ambassador for a social service organization that launched the program that we met at. Ethan helped with the launch of the program and as he continued describing how he became involved, he mentioned the anxiety and fear he felt when he returned to the organization as a client. Ethan described that:

It was kind of embarrassing coming back here because like I used to work for [organization name] so when I first came here I would see like my work colleagues and old friends and stuff, and I’m just like ahh... yeah I’m homeless now, nice to meet you.

As anxiety-provoking as it was to return, Ethan knew he needed the help to start putting the pieces back together. Despite Ethan’s current circumstances, he explained that he still aspires to one day finish his nursing degree and to leave the cycle of poverty behind him.

**Ignored and excluded**

Throughout our conversations, the theme of being ignored and excluded emerged. I was interviewing Ethan about his experience with suspensions - an exclusionary form of discipline, so it seemed obvious that being excluded would come up. However, stories of being excluded permeated nearly every aspect of Ethan’s narrative. Ethan shared stories of how he felt teachers, peers, family, and society in general excluded him. The more stories Ethan shared, the more I began to understand how he has come to embrace his lone-wolf demeanour - he consistently has only had himself to rely upon.
When Ethan was in secondary school, he recalled both his teachers and classmates disregarding and ignoring him. Despite being a dedicated student and successful academically, he struggled with group work. If he were not allowed to work on a project independently, Ethan found that the assigned group members would not bother to meet with him or let him work on it in collaboration with the group. Ethan explained by saying:

I wasn’t liked I guess? I didn’t really talk to people, like, so the popular crowd didn’t, like get along, and they just saw this poor, dirty kid who didn’t really get a chance to shower everyday, who was wearing clothes from Walmart and old beaten-up shoes and just, saw me.

Although Ethan’s peers did not explicitly say these things, Ethan internalized the experiences of being ignored and dismissed. Ethan saw himself as different from his peers, and believed his peers saw him differently as well. As we continued to talk, Ethan shared that his teachers often treated him similarly, with such disregard. Upon returning to classes after a suspension, Ethan described his experiences with his teachers by saying:

They would look at me like I wasn't there. If that makes sense, like I would put my hand up, you know, trying to ask a question, like I was always ignored. Like I remember uh going to math class because the teacher was like, hey uh, if anybody needs help like, you know with algebra and stuff, just come in I’ll give you a brief crash course. I went in there, he told me I wasn't welcome there. Cause I make other students uncomfortable.

This feeling of being ignored was not limited to his school experiences. Ethan had no relationship with either of his biological parents, and his grandparents, who were his guardians, were inattentive to him. I asked Ethan about his grandparents’ reaction towards his frequent suspensions, and he responded that “They were really into substances and stuff like that so just
didn’t care, like I could’ve not went to school whatsoever and they would’ve not given a shit less”. This type of description regarding his grandparents arose a few times throughout our interviews and he later summed up their relationship by saying:

yeah, me in general was the least of their priorities. I can remember like a handful of good memories from them and they’re probably within the last five years since they’ve both tried to sober up and get their life on track.

Eventually, for reasons that he did not describe, Ethan was removed from his grandparents’ care at age 15 and placed in a group home as a crown ward. Ethan described the group homes as a hostile environment that was constantly stressful. Within the first few weeks, Ethan was transferred to two other group homes because of his behaviour. Ethan explained that the term “transferred” in the context of group homes is the polite way of saying he was “kicked out”.

Ethan felt that the agency was quick to send him to another group home, and that was intended to be a solution.

At 17, after living with a foster family for a bit, Ethan packed his bags and moved out of town. He secured an apartment and was working full time while also trying to finish secondary school. This new school was in a wealthier part of town, and although it was the only school he was not suspended or expelled from, Ethan felt like he did not belong. Ethan described:

It was a lot of like better off people, so, I didn’t really get into fights because like I was like in the wind, and nobody really noticed till they really thought about it. But yeah, I just did my baking program. There was like one or two kids in foster care…they weren’t really outcasts, but you know they, they were in foster care, so they’re like “ah” you know “this guys cool like he’s chill” because a lot of them [youth in foster care] come out of group homes which are like more hostile environments so they weren’t really scared of
me if that makes sense. They saw me as a person, not an obstacle…Like they [the other students at school] saw me as some big bad evil guy who’s going to smash their head in they like look at me wrong or something [laughs].

Ethan seemed almost unphased by the experience he described having at this school. He was already accustomed to being regarded as an “obstacle”, or not even being seen at all. Ethan never stayed long in one place anyways, he knew he this school was just temporary. It was just a place to get an education.

Fast forward to present day, and Ethan still experiences being excluded and pushed aside. He was recently evicted from room the was renting, fired from his job, and now feels the daily pressure of returning to the homeless shelter by 5pm or Ethan risks losing his bed. It is clear why Ethan maintains a solitary presence; Ethan has had only himself to rely on, and everything else in life seems to be predictably temporary.

**Childhood adversity**

Ethan has always known adversity. Throughout our interviews, Ethan described experiences that would be difficult for anyone to cope with, let alone a child. Ethan’s biological father was not involved in his upbringing, meaning Ethan was born to a single mother. In Ethan’s early years, his mother disappeared, and Ethan’s grandparents took over as his guardians. Ethan’s grandparents struggled with substance abuse which contributed to other problems such as food insecurity and homelessness. Ethan grimly recalls “they were heavily into drugs, like heavily. There was a lot of times where like they would pick drugs and stuff over like food or a place to live, so…” He drifts off with his sentence, as if he is not ready to share his deeper thoughts about these experiences, or maybe has yet to process them himself. Ethan continued to explain how most of his childhood was spent bouncing between different places, staying in cars,
and sleeping on grandma’s ever-changing boyfriends’ couches. As a result, things like basic hygiene and staying warm were never ending battles. When Ethan recalled one of his earliest suspensions, he shared that he had been wearing the same clothes for awhile and was unable to bathe. He continued:

I was like 5 or 6 but I didn’t know. They just sent me home, said ‘don’t come back, tell your mom you need a shower and like a change of clothes, you stink.’ I was like okay… So I did that and my grandma was like ‘Fuck them and blah blah blah [imitating a nasally sounding woman]’ I’m like [makes a confused looking face] Cause you know, we were homeless.

Ethan then added that his teachers likely knew he was homeless but “they probably just didn’t care”. It became clear that in addition to Ethan’s needs not being met at home, he lacked the caring support of other adults in his life. As our conversation shifted to other suspensions, Ethan began to explain how when he got into fights at school, he never intended to hurt anyone, he just wanted to protect himself. Ethan explained his inclination to fight back by saying “I was hit a lot a when I was young, like first day it was just like fight or flight”. In addition to having to physically protect himself from violence, Ethan had to find ways to cope with the other challenges life presented. Ethan panhandled and began working at 13 years old to make money to buy food and walked the streets to stay warm when he had no where to go. Ethan’s basic needs were not a guarantee growing up and he relied heavily on himself to get by.

As Ethan entered secondary school, little improved. Ethan recounted one day where he was walking down the halls of his school and another student came at him from behind with a baseball bat. The dispute was over a shared romantic interest, and the other student had planned the attack. Ethan defended himself and gained control of the bat but was subsequently expelled
after the incident. Eventually Ethan was placed in a group home, and this environment was no healthier than what he was used to. Ethan paints a bleak picture of what group homes were like, saying:

Well yeah, ok group homes you put a bunch of like hormonal teens in a house where they’ll put like two or three of them, if you've ever looked at like a shelter, where there is like a bunch of bunk beds in a room, that’s basically what it was. It's just now there is like one staff there with a bunch of kids who are always yelling at each other and, like, you don’t like anyone there because its a high stress environment. People steal, people like lie, people like take shit that that just doesn’t belong to them.

Ethan coped with an incredible amount of adversity as a child, and it feels palpable when he describes the day, he started living with a foster family:

I remember like I was like happy when I got my own when I got my own bed when I went into foster care, like it was just like a realization like wow I actually have a room, cause when I, like especially when I was little like when my grandma and grandpa got divorced, I was like you know the only time I’ll get to sleep anywhere was usually on a couch and that’s when like grandma got a new boyfriend.

Although being placed in foster home would not solve all the challenges Ethan faced, for perhaps the first time, his most basic needs were finally being met. When Ethan left his foster family and legally became and adult, his experiences with adversity continued. Facing adversity has become a large part of Ethan’s story.

**Jax**

I first met Jax at a local coffee shop after having exchanged a few brief texts with him about my research. He was referred to my study by someone in his life and Jax seemed eager to
participate. At the coffee shop I waited at a table, anxiously trying to figure out if the next person walking into the shop would be him. Most other customers were retirees, so when a lean 20-year-old, dressed in dark clothes walked in, I figured this may be him. We made eye contact, took a deep breath, and introduced ourselves. We settled in at our corner table and began chatting. I immediately sensed Jax’s approachable demeanour and I felt like I could hear the humility in his voice when he spoke. I knew next to nothing about the young man sitting in front of me and when I asked him to tell me a bit about himself, I felt a little nervous. It was a loaded question, and I did not want to come off as pushy. Jax answers my questions very matter-of-factly at first, bluntly describing the obstacles and barriers he has been facing over the past week. Eleven days prior he was released from custody after a 40 day stay at a nearby detention centre. Upon release his phone was not returned, his adoptive family did not let him move back home, and he was currently sleeping on his biological mother’s couch, someone who he has had challenging times living with before. Jax is currently trying to uphold his probation orders and is looking into finishing secondary school or getting a job. He was denied Ontario Works (a temporary financial and employment assistance program), but fortunately was able to be added to his biological mother’s Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) as an adult dependent. Jax described trying to balance a lot of stresses that have piled on after his release, and it is understandable when he said he is more stressed out now then when he was incarcerated. I wondered how this all happened, and as Jax started to fill in the missing chapters of his story, I begin to see how quickly his situation deteriorated and spiralled out of control. By the end of our first interview Jax’s tone shifts from an objective stance to a tone filled with raw emotion. He shared that he has a six-month-old daughter with an ex-partner and that he has never been allowed to meet or hold his baby girl. It is clear that Jax is deeply pained by this, and that it fuels a fire within him to get
his life back on track. As I walk away from the interview I reflect on our conversation and am genuinely hoping he has positive news to share when we next meet.

**History of suspensions and culmination of secondary school**

“It’s so easy to cast away the troubled kids that a lot of them get forgotten”

Jax was suspended more times than he can remember and expelled from a couple of schools. Jax began getting suspended early in elementary school for his disruptive and violent behaviour. He would yell, shout, and throw chairs in the class when he got angry. Jax had an Educational Assistant that would sit with him to try and mitigate these outbursts, but it did not seem to help. In grade 4, Jax had a breakthrough in school, his behaviour improved, and he was happier and healthier. It happened at the same time that he was removed from his biological mother’s custody and placed in foster care. He was adopted by his foster family who provided him with a healthy environment, and he flourished – albeit temporarily. Jax fell back into his old behaviours and started getting in trouble again. By grade 7 and 8, Jax’s violent outbursts in class faded but he still would get in trouble for verbally fighting and talking back to his teachers. Jax did not like being told what to do, and still maintains his weariness of those in a position of authority.

As Jax transitioned into secondary school, his apathy towards school grew and he began using marijuana and alcohol. Jax’s countless suspensions and expulsions throughout secondary school were mostly the result of fighting with authority, truancy and using substances. In addition to being suspended, Jax also faced charges under the Youth Criminal Justice Act in some circumstances. Jax attended about five different secondary schools and he had the same struggles regardless of where he attended. At some schools, Jax was only enrolled for a semester before he would be expelled. To help curb Jax’s troublesome behaviour, Jax ‘s adoptive parents
sent him to board at a private school a few hours away. That too only lasted a short while before he was expelled. The constant suspensions took a toll on Jax and he shared that he felt he was:

Too far [behind] to catch [up on schoolwork]. Like I was already far behind when I got suspended right because I wasn’t doing the work anyways, when they brought me back, I was so much further behind I kinda…I just gave up. That’s when I kept getting suspended and stuff because I just didn’t care. Just stopped caring…

After Jax turned 18, he stopped showing up at school and dropped out. Since leaving secondary school, Jax has continued to be involved in the justice system, worked intermittently, and has considered finishing his secondary school diploma requirements. He estimated that he may still have up to two years worth of credits to obtain before he could earn his Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Aspirations

Jax’s aspirations for himself have shifted greatly over the past five to seven years. When Jax was still in secondary school, he held on to a dream of becoming a rapper. Jax’s music, a blend of R&B and rap had some following on the local scene, and it gave Jax a sense of much needed confidence. Jax explained the significance saying:

I was bullied, eight, ninth grade. Mostly grade school, but then eventually I got to secondary school, and I don’t know if I just stopped listening to it, but people started listening to my music and I then I kinda, I gained like a confidence from it. And I think people realize that. And they don’t like to pick on kids with confidence because they’re worried they’re going to get their ass kicked or something but…Like people listened to it. Like people, they looked at me like I was somebody that deserved respect because I was making music like that, you know, so they treated me with respect.
Jax’s passion for music gave him a future to look forward to. Jax embodied what he thought a rapper should be and said “I was genuinely convinced that it [music] was going to take me somewhere. I was like I don’t need secondary school; I don’t need to get a job ever, I can just make music and it’ll take me somewhere. It never did, but you know.” As Jax reflected on this time in his life he described how he would smoke and use drugs, ditch class and dress similarly to the famous rapper he respected to build his own image as a rapper. Jax finished reflecting on this period in his life by saying “[I] definitely put too much faith on a person that I’ve never met.” As Jax grew older his idea of becoming a famous rapper faded and present-day Jax described how he just wants to finally feel comfortable with where he is at.

Jax described how old friends now have jobs, steady relationships, and apartments. For a short period of time, Jax had these things too, but within the past year, things spiraled out of control. Jax was at a point in his life where he was steadily working, living in an apartment with his girlfriend and had no contact with the police. This temporary stability did not last- after a bitter relationship breakup, Jax moved back in with his adoptive family, lost his job and began drinking again. Jax ended up getting new legal charges against him and then subsequently breached his bail conditions. After breaching his bail conditions, Jax panicked and wanted to avoid the consequences of his breaches. Jax ran away but was eventually picked up by the police and additional “failures to comply with recognizance” were tacked on to Jax’s charges. Jax ended up serving a 40-day sentence in jail. Jax explained how he thought about his infant daughter constantly while he was in jail saying, “when I was incarcerated the only thing that I’d ever cry about is my daughter, and I’ve never even met her yet, right, but its like you know you already have that connection cause they’re you”. Now that Jax has been released, he wants to stay out of trouble with the police, remain sober and have steady work. Most importantly
though, Jax wants to be a positive part of his infant daughter’s life. In our first interview, Jax painfully described how he has never been able to meet his 6-month-old daughter because of a no-contact order stemming from previous charges. Jax’s pain is fueled by his experiences with the absence of his biological father, a person whom he never met. Jax concludes our first interview by maintaining “If I’m going to get my shit together for anything, it will be for her [his daughter]”. Jax speaks about his daughter in a way that sounds like his whole world has changed, and for the better. Now he needs to get his life together not only for himself, but for his daughter whom he loves unconditionally. About one month later when we met for our third interview and Jax was beaming. He pulled out his beat-up phone and with a prideful smile showed me pictures of his beautiful daughter. He was now allowed to be part of her life and seemed overjoyed by the prospect. Moreover, Jax shared that he thinks he has a job lined up – his future was starting to look up.

**Ignored and excluded**

In my interviews with Jax, he expressed how he can still remember the feelings he had as a child when he felt excluded. Jax described feeling like he was cast away when times were challenging and how feels that he never really fit in. Jax shared stories of being temporarily and permanently removed from schools, being bullied, being denied social support services, and being barred from familial relationships. Stories of exclusion and being ignored dominated Jax’s narrative.

Throughout Jax’s time in elementary and secondary school, formal exclusion by means of suspension or expulsion were common. In secondary school, sometimes Jax only lasted a semester before he was expelled and sent to another school. Jax described the typical pattern of discipline he would receive at school explaining “when I first started getting suspended it would
be like a day, then they would bump it up to a week, anything longer than a month and they would ship me to a different school”. Although starting over at a new school was common for Jax, he never felt like he had a fresh start:

Whenever they’d enroll me in a new school, I’d feel like they would warn the teachers and stuff. Like they would ship over like all my previous suspension records and what not. So they would already know like I was a troubled kid so I felt like they would treat me like a troubled kid. It didn’t help that I would act like a troubled kid.

By the time this pattern had been established, Jax had already stopped caring about school. The pattern began years before, and after many suspensions in elementary school, Jax described being pushed out of his neighbourhood school altogether. Jax had always struggled behaviourally in school and after many suspensions, he was reduced to half days at school. Eventually Jax was removed from his school and placed in an alternative program for struggling students. During this tumultuous time, Jax said he felt:

Ostracized. I don’t know, I felt like I didn’t belong. Like I remember those feelings, like vividly when I was a kid, like feeling like I didn’t fit in and shit. Feeling like…I don’t know…I was too much to deal with and that just kind of…It’s a shitty feeling, especially as a kid you don’t really understand. You know, I thought it was their job to deal with that kind of shit. But…that’s a shitty feeling.

Jax was receiving the message that he did not belong in school and began to believe that it was not the teachers’ responsibility to support him. When Jax reflects on his times in secondary school, he described feeling like he was cast away because he was not behaving. Instead of solving the underlying issues, Jax was pushed out of the classroom, and out of school. If Jax was not in the classroom, there was no longer a problem for the teacher or class:
It’s easier for them [teachers] to pretend nothings wrong, then to actually deal with it, which is understandable though. Cuz there’s like a lot of other things like they’re teaching a whole classroom of students. Its not their responsibility to deal with one kid. Jax’s numerous suspensions took a toll on him and his engagement in school continued to wane as he fell further and further behind. Jax explains how being chronically suspended and removed from school was a precursor for him giving up on school altogether:

When they brought me back [after suspensions] I was so much further behind I kinda…I just gave up. That’s when I kept getting suspended and stuff because I just didn’t care. Just stopped caring… When I was in like regular classes like all the students were excelling, and I was like so far behind because I get kicked out of school all the time, I didn’t know what the fuck anybody was doing. So I couldn’t…its hard to catch up, when you’re that far behind. And I just felt like an idiot for the like rest of the semester, and that, maybe that’s why I hate schools though.

Even after returning to school from a suspension, Jax did not feel like he could integrate back into class. Learning opportunities were missed and the educational gap continued to widen, reducing his chances for any academic success. Jax felt academically inadequate to his peers. Even beyond academics, Jax noted that he felt as though he did not fit in with his peers. Jax described that other classmates did not want to be around him, saying “people didn’t really want to hang out with me ever. I don’t know if I was bad, or just weird, might have been both”. Jax also later explained that he had an educational assistant that sat with him. This support was meant to held reduce Jax’s outbursts, but he describes that it made him feel different from his classmates. Jax says “It felt weird. Like the kids with the EA’s [educational assistants] always got looked at differently. Always got looked at funny. Like I felt that I was singled out. Which I
was, I was the kid in the class with an EA.” During this time in school, Jax also remembered being bullied and it is obvious that Jax never felt like he belonged. Jax concluded his experience in school by describing how he felt like he was given up on:

I feel like I was just one of the kids that they gave up on. I mean cause they can only do so much. Like its not their job to deal with…like you know… how I used to behave in secondary school and shit. Grade school [too]. Like their job is to teach. That's just, that's what they do you know. And they don’t get paid enough to deal with that. And nine times out of ten they don’t care. I don’t know. Some kids just fall through the cracks I guess.

Jax expressed this sentiment throughout our conversations – he felt he had no place in school.

Beyond the classroom, Jax also experienced being ignored and excluded. From birth, Jax’s biological father chose to not be involved in his life, and for reasons Jax did not fully explain, he was removed from his biological mother’s care around age nine. Jax was placed in a foster home and was later adopted by the same family. Although Jax maintains that his adoptive family is supportive, he was recently not allowed to return home after being released from jail:

They didn’t want me living there [at home] anymore because there’s kids there. Its understandable but, I don’t know it’s just was a shock to the system. When I got out I expected everything would be like you know like how it used to be. I actually didn’t find out I couldn’t move back in with them until I was in jail. Yeah so when I got out I moved back in with my [biological] mom which has always been kind of rough…

Jax explained he has already had some arguments with his biological mother and said that they are at risk of being evicted. Jax’s biological mother was unable to pay rent and at the time of our last interview Jax and his biological mom had received one warning from the landlord.
Additionally, Jax was shut out from his daughter’s life for her first six months. At the time of our last interview, Jax was looking for a job, but he is at a disadvantage. Jax has no secondary school diploma, and a criminal record. His near-constant experiences of being excluded have permeated all aspects of his life and has left him hanging on the margins of society.

**Childhood adversity**

Jax grew up in an unstable environment where his basic needs were not consistently met. Jax was an only child and was living with his biological mother, a single parent. He described his biological mother as someone who was sporadic and struggled to manage money, which for him meant there often was not enough food to eat. Jax also described his early years in school as challenging. He remembers getting in trouble even in his earliest school years. Screaming, yelling, and throwing chairs were common occurrences. These struggles led to being socially excluded and bullied by his peers.

For reasons not explicitly stated to me, Jax was placed into foster care around age nine. His foster family, which later became his adoptive family was able to provide stability and support and things began to improve for Jax. Jax describes how he changed schools and recalls what it was like when he was welcomed by his new family saying:

Well it was exciting cause when I moved in, like before I moved in with my um, like my adoptive parents, I wasn’t eating very often because I lived with my mom right and like she doesn’t really know how to manage money, but when I moved in with them, like, you know, there was like food, and they were like super supportive all the time and we would go do stuff as a family and like there would be like youth groups and they, they like made me go to church and stuff, which I liked when I was that young.
After the novelty of living with his new adoptive family wore off, Jax began getting in trouble again. Jax began abusing substances and became involved with the youth justice system at around 13 years of age. Since then, Jax has continued to be involved with the justice system. Jax faced hardship throughout his childhood and continues to be challenged with difficult circumstances. The challenges Jax has faced in his life that have threatened his basic physical and psychological needs. I now begin to understand why Jax describes himself as an anxious person.

Caleb

Caleb is youngest participant. We also met in a coffee shop and we settled in a booth tucked away in the back corner. Caleb was 18 at the time of the interview, just old enough to participate, and he seemed more nervous than the other participants. I wondered if it may be a result of our age difference, with me being 10 years his senior. I make a conscious effort to be relaxed and open as I want to make him feel comfortable. When we first start chatting his answers are short, and I want to get to know him and his story on a deeper level. As our conversations continue, he begins to open up, and I think he is starting to trust me more. Caleb’s life currently seems to be filled with a lot of uncertainties, but it is met with an anxious excitement. After the holiday break that is approaching, Caleb will only have a few weeks until he is done with secondary school altogether. He has worked hard throughout secondary school, completing all academic level classes and pushing himself despite his learning disability and ADHD. Caleb has known for many years that he has wanted to go to university or college, and that helped to keep him motivated. He graduated secondary school six months prior and decided to do another semester. Caleb felt he was not ready to decide what he wanted to do for post-secondary school, so he decided to take some time to plan his next steps. The end of secondary
school is now quickly approaching, and Caleb is excited. Caleb has never been particularly fond of school and sitting in a classroom but has been able to find his passion in shop classes throughout secondary school. The extra time Caleb has had to make decisions about his post-secondary education has paid off. Caleb wants to attend college in the next town over for a specialized applied program that begins in nine months. His parents supported him and helped him look for a fitting program. Acceptances had not come out yet, but Caleb was feeling confident that he would be accepted into the program. Caleb expressed that he thinks it is time to try and find a job. Caleb said he needs to start saving money for college and although he does not have much work experience, he hopes to find a job through family connections. Despite Caleb’s excitement about what is coming over the next few months, he is also feeling a little overwhelmed. Caleb is nervous about doing well and fitting in at college, and still needs a job to start saving money. At the end of our first interview, with a little smirk on his face, he slips in that he is supposed to be in class right now. I have a little chuckle, and I am starting to see his energetic, fun-loving, and slightly mischievous personality come through. We plan to meet at a more suitable time for our second and third interview.

**History of suspensions and culmination of secondary school**

“I was like I really shouldn’t do this because I don’t want to get suspended but then it just kinda happened anyways because I couldn’t like control it [his reaction]”

Caleb was suspended about seven times in elementary school, usually for one or two days at a time and once in secondary school. Caleb was bullied at school and the bullying led to most of his suspensions. Once Caleb would hit his breaking point with being bullied, he would retaliate, and a fight would often ensue. Caleb and the bully would both be suspended, and Caleb felt as though the bullying he endured was never properly addressed. Caleb explained:
I was bullied a lot, so most of them [suspensions] was [for] like fighting back because I didn’t want to be bullied. So I would just fight them back and we would get suspended because fighting is bad. And the teachers never saw any of the other parts, just the fight.

After Caleb would get into a fight with a bully, he felt like his side of the story was never heard, recalling that the principal would say “[I] should’ve tried walking away, or going to tell the teacher, or go to the principal, or…whatever, talk it out. But I tried all of those and they didn’t seem to understand that at all. That I did do those things”. Caleb also struggled with some of his teachers and would get in trouble for his boisterous ways. When he was suspended, Caleb was typically gone from school for only one or two days and he remembered his mom holding him accountable. When Caleb was out of school, he recalled:

My mom would always stay with me. And would make sure to get like schoolwork every single time even when I was in secondary school. She would go back to get the schoolwork that I’m missing so I had to do it, and when I wasn’t doing the schoolwork for the most time she wanted us to do chores, and help around the house, cause we were at home not at school.

When Caleb says “we”, he is referring to his older siblings who were suspended and skipped school even more than he did. When Caleb entered secondary school, he was suspended within the first week of classes. Similar to his elementary years, a classmate was picking on him, and once Caleb had had enough, they got into a physical fight. After this incident Caleb really wanted to turn things around. He had plans to go to university and follow in his dad’s footsteps – someone whom he looked up to. Caleb did not want to risk his future by getting in trouble. He
knows all to well how much getting in trouble can impact one’s future path – after all, Jax is his older brother.

**Aspirations**

Caleb has always wanted to attend post-secondary school. From a young age Caleb was inspired by his dad, a successful academic at the local university. His dad’s success allowed their large family to participate in extracurriculars, take road trips, and in general live comfortably. Caleb’s admiration for his dad’s achievements helped to keep him motivated him throughout school. Caleb described “growing up and everything I always wanted to go to university, and I had the grades to make university, I always seen university as like what I would want to do, to go get a job.” Caleb was interested in studying in the field that his dad works in and was also interested in civil engineering. As Caleb grew older, he described that he:

Realized that like working on cars and stuff is what I like doing a lot more and working, building stuff with my hands. Which would be more college based, like apprenticeship programs. So even though I have the grades for that [university], I’m probably going to end up doing that [apprenticeship program] because it’s like what I prefer doing.

Even though Caleb’s post-secondary school plans were shifting, Caleb completed academic classes all throughout secondary school, despite struggling at times with a learning disability and ADHD.

After being suspended throughout elementary school, and getting into more trouble in grade 8, Caleb knew something had to change. Caleb was fearful his suspensions might affect his chances of getting into university, especially competitive programs. Caleb’s concern grew once he was suspended in the first week of secondary school, and that became a turning point. Furthermore, Caleb’s older brother, Jax struggled a lot with school, suspensions and behaviour.
Caleb could see firsthand the path Jax was going down and Caleb knew that was not what he wanted for himself. Caleb wanted to focus on doing well in school and stay out of trouble. Caleb was able to make friends once he began secondary school– and escape the bullying he experienced in elementary school. Having friends made it easier to stay out of trouble as he no longer felt like he had to defend himself against bullies. Throughout the next four and a half years of secondary school, Caleb was able to avoid suspensions and keep his focus on the goal of pursuing post secondary education. Caleb remained motivated to keep on a path that would help him achieve his goals. Now that Caleb is almost finished being a secondary school student, he is looking to find work. Caleb’s wants to work so that he can begin to save money for post-secondary school. Even from a young age, Caleb had clear ideas and goals regarding his education and future. This broad goal of obtaining a post-secondary education and having a “good’ job seemed to help guide Caleb through his secondary school years, and it continues to propel him to do well and achieve smaller goals along the way.

Ignored and excluded

Caleb shared multiple stories of being excluded or dismissed throughout our interviews. Caleb was formally excluded by means of suspension from school and experienced being informally excluded in the classroom and in peer relationships. In elementary school, Caleb struggled to fit in. He was bullied by his peers and always sought acceptance. Caleb explained how he coped with the bullying by saying:

It kind of made me try to be like more funny because I always wanted people to like me instead of hate me. Cause I never understood why they didn’t like me. So it just kind of made me want to try harder to make them like me instead of hate me.
This plan would often backfire though. The methods Caleb used to seek attention were often perceived as troublesome behaviour by staff. In some instances, it resulted in Caleb being suspended and excluded from school and his peers. Caleb’s other reaction to the bullying was to fight, which also resulted in suspensions. Caleb gained a reputation of being somewhat of a troublemaker in the eyes of the school staff. Caleb explained:

We had a supply teacher for two days, and the teacher didn’t think I could handle being with the supply teacher and they told me not to come to school, because we were going to have a supply teacher and I wasn’t allowed to come back to school which was also very confusing.

Caleb described feeling angry with his teachers at the time for not being given a chance, saying “It definitely didn’t seem fair to me at all when I’d get told I couldn’t go to school the next day because of something dumb. That shouldn’t be allowed to happen”. Caleb also described another incident where he felt like he was unjustly denied a fair chance and ignored. Caleb explained that he had an accommodation listed in his education plan that allowed him to use a computer to complete English tests in class because of his learning disability. Caleb’s teacher ignored his needs and Caleb ultimately failed the test. It was only when Caleb’s parents brought the issue to the principal that it was resolved.

Outside of school, Caleb described feeling that his athletic abilities were overlooked. Caleb is athleticism skilled but always felt that he was overlooked because of his stature:

I’m a bigger person so when I would tell them [coaches] what position I play they would never believe me and put me as something else…It is for sure frustrating. A lot. Because its been multiple times where like the position I play is filled by people who don’t know
how to play it and they’re not doing very good and its really frustrating to see, but, and then not have them listen to me at all what I’m saying.

Although being overlooked in sports was frustrating, Caleb worked hard to prove himself and eventually found his place on the teams he played with. As Caleb progressed through secondary school, his experiences with being excluded dwindled. Caleb grew to enjoy his time in secondary school and summarizes his secondary school years saying “I got to secondary school and met a lot more people and made new friends, and it became a lot better experience. So as it went on, its gotten a lot easier and a lot better and I enjoyed it a lot more going to school everyday.” Caleb began to feel like he belonged – he had friends, found new passions, and took on leadership roles on projects. Caleb was involved in his school community and was thriving.

**Parental support and expectations**

In the stories Caleb shared, the theme of *Parental support and expectations* emerged. I identified feeling supported and being held to high expectations as a single theme in Caleb’s narrative because the matters were intertwined. The high expectations Caleb’s parents had for him were met with support. When Caleb was suspended in his elementary-school years, he described his parents as being supportive. If the suspension was unjust in his eyes, Caleb’s parents advocated for him. When Caleb was suspended on reasonable grounds, his mom would collect all the work he was missing and held him accountable at home. Caleb was expected to complete a school day’s worth of work and help with chores while he was suspended. Caleb also explained that he felt his parents held him to high expectations in other contexts. Since Caleb was not the only one being suspended in his household, his mom had a routine set up. Caleb’s two other siblings closest in age were suspended more frequently than he was. In an exchange in
our interview, Caleb explained how he felt more pressure from his parents to behave despite
being suspended less:

Adrienne: Did you put that pressure on yourself or was that from your siblings or
parents?
Caleb: It seemed most like my parents honestly. They’d seem like more annoyed when
I’d get suspended than my siblings. Like they didn’t expect it from me, but they would
expect it from them. And I was supposed to be the one that wasn’t supposed to get
suspended, that’s for my other two siblings.
Adrienne: And what did you think?
Caleb: I found it kind of unfair that they would get off easier almost. Like by the end they
wouldn’t have to do as many chores or anything when they get suspended than if I get
suspended because they almost always were suspended, when I’d get suspended it was
like such a big deal.
Adrienne: Why do you think that was?
Caleb: I don’t know honestly. I think it was just, my other siblings just were worse
behaved generally than I was, so they just kind of learned to expect it from them and they
didn’t expect it from me.
Caleb also explained how he feels his parents hold him to higher academic expectations than his
siblings. Caleb feels pressure to do well in school, and often met those expectations:

Typically, they expect me to get pretty good grades and take high level classes, like even
though I’m going to college, all my classes were university level. And they always
expected me to get good grades in them because they knew that I could get good grades
in them. If I didn’t, it was just from lack of trying because I didn’t want to. So, its always
been really hard if I do really bad on a test to tell them about it because they really want me to do well and they know I can do well, so when they see me do bad they know that it’s just because I don’t want to do good in the class.

Although Caleb felt pressure to do well academically, he says he always felt supported as well.

When Caleb needed someone to advocate for him, his parents would become actively involved. For example, when Caleb failed an English test because he was denied the accommodations identified in his education plan, his parents advocated for him. As a result, the issue was rectified. In recent months, Caleb identified that his parents supported him when he was making big decisions about his future. When Caleb was deciding to return for another semester of secondary school, he had his parents to bounce ideas off of. Caleb also explained that his parents helped research post-secondary programs with him and helped him through the application process. Caleb has always felt that he has had his parents support and seems to be grateful for their encouragement over the years.

**Collective Findings**

Although each participant shared a uniquely different story about their suspensions, four overarching themes emerged that tied their individual narratives into shared experiences. *Aspirations*, and experiences of feeling *Ignored and Excluded* emerged as two themes across all participant narratives. Ethan and Jax shared a third common theme – *Childhood Adversity*. On the other hand, Caleb’s third theme that emerged was feelings of *Parental Support and High expectations*. Table 5 displays the themes that emerged for each participant. In this section I will expand on these themes from a collective perspective.
**Table 5**

*Emergent Themes*

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**Aspirations**

Ethan, Jax, and Caleb all talked about their hopes for their futures in varying ways throughout our interviews. All three participants were experiencing times of uncertainty and also aspired for greater things in life. The participants all had an image of what they longed for in the future and their aspirations were greatly influenced by their life experiences. Some of the aspirations expressed by participants were paralleled with specific goals and plans of how to achieve their longings. On the contrary, some aspirations were met simply with a burning desire to flourish and lacked clear goals or plans. The aspirations each participant shared had been a driving force in their life. For Ethan, the foundational goal of “getting an education” to leave a life of poverty behind has fueled his decisions. Ethan explained, “I was always one who like actually wanted to like you know graduate, and I wanted to like get an education because like I didn’t want to end up like, like my grandma or grandpa.” Ethan lived with the repercussions of his grandparent’s behaviours as a child and knew he wanted more for himself as an adult. Today, Ethan is part way through finishing his nursing degree. Although Ethan has been facing challenging barriers to his success, he is still determined to work towards the future he dreams of. Alternatively, Jax’s aspirations have been less consistent over the years, but he is driven now
by a powerful force. Jax’s infant daughter is now his motivation to get his life on track. Jax described that “everything’s changed. No, everything’s changed. I don’t know, like the way I look at life is different. I don’t know, all that stupid corny shit they tell you about like having kids…its all true.” Jax also explained how his biological father was never a part of his life, and how he is determined to be the opposite of his absent father. Jax knows what he wants for himself and his daughter, and he is making decisions to start building the future he dreams of. Lastly, Caleb has held the specific goal of attending post-secondary school from a young age. This goal helped Caleb stay focused and motivated academically. Caleb knew he would need to stop being suspended in order to stay on track with his educational goals. Caleb watched his brother, Jax, face the consequences of his actions, and Caleb knew that his plans would be derailed if he did not change. Caleb says, “It’s definitely helped me avoid a lot by knowing what’s going to happen if I do”, referring to watching Jax, his brother, head down a troublesome path. The aspirations the participants shared have motivated them and helped them to make decisions along the way.

Additionally, these aspirations were formed, in part by negative experiences. All three participants understood what life may be like if they did not consciously work towards their goals. Ethan intimately understood what living in poverty was like because he lived it when he was under his grandparents’ guardianship. Jax understood what it was like to grow up without knowing his birth father. Caleb understood how if he continued to down the same path as his brother Jax, his educational goals would be beyond his reach. Ethan, Jax, and Caleb all knew what they wanted for themselves, and knew from firsthand experience, specifically what they did not want. The participants’ aspirations were not just what they were working towards; they were also aspirations to not be something.
Many of the times the participants spoke about their hopes for the future were unprompted. It sounded as though they were speaking honestly and candidly about what they wanted for themselves. Despite the circumstances that participants found themselves in, they all clearly identified what they wanted their future to look like and what they did not want it to look like. The aspirations each participant talked about serves as a fuel that keeps the fire burning inside of them. Their aspirations help guide their daily decisions and keep them progressing forward.

**Ignored and excluded**

Experiences of being ignored and excluded was the most apparent theme that emerged throughout Ethan’s, Jax’s and Caleb’s narratives. With school suspensions being a form of exclusionary discipline, it was no surprise exclusion was a common theme amongst the participants. With roughly 50 combined suspensions and expulsions between the three participants, Ethan, Jax and Caleb were all too familiar with being formally excluded from their schools. Beyond their formal school suspensions, many more stories emerged that highlighted the chronic experiences of exclusion the participants faced, both in the classroom, and outside of the classroom. Stories of being ignored, disregarded, bullied and excluded were strewn throughout all of our conversations. Some of the stories shared were charged with emotion, clearly still eliciting some pain as the stories were shared. On the contrary, some stories of being excluded which were perhaps more difficult to hear, were those with very little emotion attached to them. It was as if the participant(s) had expected or just accepted the exclusion they were experiencing as normal.

In the school, experiences of being excluded went deeper than the suspensions. All three participants identified that they had struggled to fit in socially at school. Jax and Caleb
remembered being bullied, and Ethan felt that his peers “just saw a poor, dirty kid” when they looked at him. The participants described their elementary years with little mention of friendships. The participants also felt as though they were not worth their teachers’ time. They were dismissed as being “troubled kids”. The participants described stories of being denied extra help, feeling singled out, and being outright ignored by teachers. There was a clear message being received. The three participants did not belong in their school communities.

For Ethan and Jax, experiences of being ignored and excluded permeated nearly all aspects of their lives. Ethan and Jax were both estranged from their biological fathers and removed from the care of their primary caregivers. Ethan and Jax were also familiar with being kicked out, or not being allowed to return to their residences, and both could barely recall the exact number of secondary schools that they attended. Ethan and Jax were passed around to different schools when they got into trouble and have been fired from jobs on more than one occasion. At the time of the interviews, Ethan and Jax were both continuing to face exclusion. It had become a chronic pattern that they had grown to expect.

The collective experiences of being ignored and excluded were painful and all too prevalent throughout the narratives Ethan, Jax and Caleb shared. Each interview uncovered more and more stories of exclusion, particularly with Ethan and Jax. Ethan and Jax’s experience with exclusion spanned far beyond their experiences with suspension and was interwoven into almost all aspects of their lives.

**Childhood adversity, and parental support and expectations**

The third theme is where the participants stories diverge. In Ethan and Jax’s interviews, the theme of childhood adversity arose, whereas in Caleb’s narrative, the final theme was one of parental support and high expectations. Ethan and Jax’s early lives included turbulent
circumstances and they had biological parent(s)/guardian(s) who struggled to meet their basic needs. Both Ethan and Jax struggled as children with food insecurity and both entered the foster care system. Beyond their early years, Ethan and Jax continued to face great adversity and accumulated numerous barriers, including involvement with the youth justice system. Although Caleb described adversity, such as being bullied, the adversity he described was less pervasive in his life than in Ethan and Jax’s narratives. When Caleb explained difficult circumstances, like being bullied, he also explained how he felt supported and encouraged by his parents. Caleb felt that his parents were able to advocate for him and that they held him to high expectations. These experiences of feeling supported for Caleb seemed to overpower the experiences of adversity in his life which is why it emerged as a theme. Although Jax and Caleb lived in the same household and shared the same set of parents for many years, Jax had a very different experience. Both Caleb and Jax explained that they were required by their mother to do schoolwork and chores when they were at home because of suspensions. For Caleb, this was effective, and helped keep him on track with his academics. Jax on the other hand would become frustrated and angry when he was told to chores and schoolwork. Jax said that this often led him to spiral out of control, and he would then have to face more consequences at home, such as being grounded in his room.

This is an example of how although Caleb and Jax experienced parental support at their shared home, the outcomes were very different. The support Jax’s adoptive parents could offer him often led to big arguments and disruptions, whereas for Caleb, the same type of support was well received. Jax described throughout the interviews that he felt he was supported by his adoptive parents, but it did not seem that it mitigated his challenging behaviour. For Jax, the adversity he experienced outweighs his experiences of parental support.
The theme of childhood adversity for Ethan and Jax has continued beyond childhood. Ethan and Jax were in their early 20’s at the time of interviews and were still experiencing incredibly challenging circumstances. For Caleb, who is now legally an adult, the theme of being supported and held to high expectations by his parents still prevails. The conflicting themes have been continuous throughout the participants’ respective narratives.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to document, analyse and interpret the lived experience of youth who have been suspended one or more times from an Ontario secondary school and hear their voices. The three research questions used to guide the interviews and this study were:

1. How have suspensions impacted a youth’s current circumstances?
2. What influences a student’s experience of suspensions?
3. How has one’s self-efficacy beliefs impacted their experiences?

In this section I will answer each research question as it relates to the themes that emerged during the analysis of the interviews and connections to existing literature. I will also introduce an alternative theoretical framework to self-efficacy theory to better understand the participants lived experiences. I will then discuss the overarching findings of the study. After, I will discuss the implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of the study. Lastly, I will share my personal reflections and provide a concluding summary that highlights the significance of the study.

How Have Suspensions Impacted Youth’s Current Circumstances?

All three participants are in unique circumstances, but their current circumstances can be grouped into one of two categories – favourable and adverse. Both Ethan and Jax’s circumstances are adverse— they are facing extreme challenges. Ethan and Jax are both struggling with financial security, employment, and housing, and desperately want to change their situation. On the contrary, Caleb’s circumstances are considered favourable. He is finishing his secondary school experience on a positive note and anticipating the start of post-secondary
education. To answer the question of how suspensions have impacted a youth’s current circumstances, I will discuss the adverse and favourable outcomes separately. I will begin with the impact of suspensions on Ethan and Jax followed by the impact of suspensions on Caleb.

Ethan and Jax share the experience of being chronically suspended and expelled throughout their elementary and secondary school years. Suspensions were so common for Ethan and Jax they became accustomed to the process. Ethan and Jax could not recall the exact number of suspensions they had experienced, but both put their estimates at more than 20 suspensions. Ethan and Jax also switched schools so often that they struggled to recall the number of schools they had attended. Expulsions and/or transferring to a new school sometimes happened multiple times in one academic year. This constant changing of school depleted their sense of belonging, interrupted their academics, and limited their opportunities to participate in extracurriculars. Neither participant felt that suspensions benefited them, and neither of them explicitly connected their current adverse circumstances to their history of suspensions. However, the type of adversity that Ethan and Jax are living with is well documented in the literature as being connected to suspensions. Suspensions are linked to poorer adult outcomes such as increased involvement in the criminal justice system, unemployment, substance use/abuse and homelessness (Rosenbaum, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Russell J. et al., 2014). Ethan and Jax are living in some combination of these realities. Additionally, Ethan and Jax both left secondary school before graduating, and there is a notable relationship between the number of suspensions and likelihood of dropping out of secondary school (Arcia, 2006; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Ethan however returned to an alternative school setting and eventually graduated with his secondary school diploma. In a large meta-analysis of suspensions and related outcomes, the amalgamated data showed that the more suspensions students have faced, the more likely they are to drop out.
of secondary school before receiving their diploma (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Dropping out of secondary school also is linked to poorer future job outcomes and increased future criminal activity (Bjerk, 2012). Bjerk (2012) also found that students who dropped out and reported that they felt “pushed out” of school faired much worse in terms of employment and criminal involvement. It is apparent that the adversity Ethan and Jax are facing are common outcomes amongst people chronically suspended from school. Although the literature strongly links suspensions with poor outcomes, it can not be concluded that suspensions have caused the poor outcomes. Ethan and Jax’s narratives parallel the research that connects suspensions to poorer outcomes, and similarly, they do not explicitly conclude that suspensions are to blame for their adverse outcomes.

Though suspensions cannot be definitively responsible for adverse outcomes, it is evident through the stories that Ethan and Jax share that suspensions added additional barriers to navigate while growing up. Suspensions created two distinct barriers in Ethan and Jax’s experiences - lost opportunities, and increased exposure to vulnerabilities. Academic instruction was one of the largest opportunities lost. Each suspension led to missed opportunities for instruction. For Jax, this meant that catching up to his peers felt impossible – the potential for any academic success slipped further and further away. For Ethan, this meant that he would have to work harder, and be more resourceful to stay on top of his classes. Ethan was denied extra help when he wanted to catch up and found that teachers would deny him the opportunity to make up for tests he missed while he was suspended. Ethan and Jax also lost the opportunity to build positive relationships with many teachers. They felt many teachers pegged them as “troubled kids” before they even began class.
Adolescence is a critical time to form bonds with caring adults and positive teacher-student relationships can protect youth with conflictual parental relationships from depression and misconduct (Wang et al., 2013). However, Ethan and Jax lost many opportunities for positive teacher relationships before they began a class because of their history of suspensions. Ethan and Jax also had reduced opportunities to participate in extracurriculars because of suspensions and expulsions, lessening their community engagement. In addition to the lost opportunities, Ethan and Jax described being further exposed to vulnerabilities. When Ethan and Jax were suspended, the daily risks that they were exposed to increased. For example, when Ethan was homeless as a child and suspended, he was exposed to the weather for the duration of what would have been the school day. Ethan walked the streets to stay warm and panhandled to buy food. For Jax, suspensions in secondary school meant less supervision, and more access to drugs and alcohol. When Jax was not in school, he explained how it was more challenging to avoid participating in delinquent behaviour. Suspensions removed the participants from a relatively safe environment (school) and inadvertently placed them in riskier environments where they were more vulnerable. Ethan and Jax were struggling in various capacities, and the frequent and prolonged use of suspensions as a disciplinary measure added additional obstacles. Suspensions directly resulted in Ethan and Jax losing opportunities in school and heightened their existing vulnerabilities. Suspensions had no clear beneficial effect.

Research conducted by Murray (2003) explored risk factors and protective factors that influenced the post-school outcomes of youth with high incidence disabilities (all youth participants identified they have ADHD – a high incidence disability). Although suspensions were not explicitly mentioned as a risk or protective factor for negative post-school outcomes, the direct consequences of suspension are identified as risk factors in the school context. For
example, Murray (2003) identifies “few opportunities for involvement in school activities” and “low levels of bonding to school” as risk factors that have negative implications for youth with high-incidence disabilities. Additionally, Murray (2003) identifies “few opportunities to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with positive adult models” as a risk factor. These risk factors are paralleled in Ethan and Jax’s narratives as lost opportunities due to suspensions. Lastly, suspensions and their direct consequences did not appear as any type of protective factor. In fact, suspensions contradicted many of the protective factors, such as having “positive and supportive teacher-student relationships” and schools that have “a clear focus on building academic, social, and emotional competencies” (Murray, 2003). Murray’s (2003) research reiterates that the consequences of suspensions can become risk factors for poor post-school outcomes, and that suspensions do not promote any protective factors for youth with high-incidence disabilities.

Caleb’s experiences with suspension differ, as do his outcomes, which I have labeled as “favourable”. After numerous suspensions in elementary school, and one in the first week of secondary school, Caleb stopped receiving suspensions. Caleb wanted to stop being suspended to increase his post-secondary school opportunities and Caleb also saw how his brother was being impacted by suspensions. When Caleb began secondary school, he was put in a new environment and surrounded by new peers. The bullying that was the catalyst to many of Caleb’s suspensions in elementary school no longer occurred. Caleb’s struggle with fitting in and being bullied in elementary school was no longer an issue. Caleb had the opportunity to meet many new peers, make friends and feel that he was a part of his school community.

Caleb also expressed that he was deterred from getting into trouble because of what he saw his brother Jax going through. However, had the bullying persisted throughout secondary
school, it is difficult to imagine that Caleb would not have been suspended again. If the bullying continued, or worsened, Caleb would still likely not have been able to control his reaction/response appropriately without additional supports and intervention. Research shows that suspensions have little to no deterrence effect, and this is evident when you consider that with each suspension, a student is more and more likely to be suspended again (American Psychological Association Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008; Chin et al., 2012). Although Caleb said he wanted to avoid being suspended because of his future goals, there were no identifiable actions or skills Caleb specifically enacted to avoid being suspended. There is also no direct research that explores if there is a positive deterrence effect on siblings of those who are chronically suspended such as Caleb’s experiences.

Suspensions may have had some deterrence effect for Caleb because of his future aspirations, but more than likely the new school environment and the cessation of bullying was more impactful. The suspensions Caleb has faced have not negatively hindered his current outcomes. Caleb however felt that if he continued to get suspended, his chance at post-secondary education would be limited.

To summarize, Ethan and Jax’s experiences with suspension and subsequent post-school negative outcomes is reflected and well documented in empirical studies (Rosenbaum, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Russell J. et al., 2014; Arcia, 2006). The participants did not blame their current circumstance on suspensions, but it is clear that suspensions added additional barriers to their lives. Namely, they lost opportunities and were further exposed to their existing vulnerabilities. In Caleb’s story, the desire to change and avoid suspensions coincided with a change in environment that allowed Caleb to flourish. The change in environment happened as Caleb transitioned to secondary school and was not related to his experiences with suspensions.
Overall, suspensions did not benefit Ethan, Jax or Caleb, and all three participants attested to the immediate negative impacts that resulted from suspensions. Suspensions created additional risk factors for the youth that are linked to poor outcomes later in life. Although suspensions cannot be decisively labelled as the cause of these outcomes, suspensions can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and risk factors. Despite the negative circumstances Ethan and Jax are living in, they still have many successes and aspirations to continue to work towards. The variety of positive outcomes the participants’ shared about their lives can all be attributed to factors unrelated to their experiences with suspensions. The aspirations the participants shared have been a driving force in their lives despite their negative experiences with suspension.

What Influences a Student’s Experience of Suspensions?

In stories Ethan, Jax and Caleb shared, experiences of being ignored and excluded was a common theme. Prior to secondary school, all three participants expressed how they did not feel like they fit in with their classmates and were similarly disregarded by their teachers. Ethan, Jax, and Caleb were outcasts – ostracised by their school communities. The relationship between suspensions and ostracism is bidirectional. Suspensions furthered their experiences of ostracism by removing them from school and sending the message to their peers that they do not belong, and experiencing ostracism led to behaviours that resulted in suspensions. According to Williams (2011), there is powerful and innate human pain response to ostracism. When people attempt to be included but repeatedly fail, maladaptive coping strategies evolve. Although fighting, yelling and being disruptive is unlikely to help someone feel included, it does draw attention to them, and it is difficult to go unnoticed. Although all participants shared stories of ostracism, a dividing theme emerged. Ethan and Jax’s experiences with suspensions and ostracism were interwoven.
with additional adversity outside of school. Caleb’s experiences with suspensions and ostracism were matched by feelings of parental support and high expectations.

Ethan and Jax’s early years were challenging and stressful. Even their most basic needs such as access to nutritious food was not met consistently. The adversity that Ethan and Jax were facing as children can be described as toxic stress (also commonly referred to as adverse childhood experiences or ACE’s). According to Shonkoff and Garner (2012), toxic stress is defined as “strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body’s stress responses systems in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship” (see Figure 1). Both Ethan and Jax faced frequent and or prolonged stressful events that would activate their stress response. Additionally, as young children, both lacked the buffering protection of a supportive adult. The consequences of toxic stress are deleterious, and the impacts can be seen across childhood and well into adulthood (Bucci et al., 2016, Shern et al., 2016). Toxic stress in childhood has been shown to cause structural changes in the brain and have negative effects on learning, memory, cognition, and executive functions and self-regulation. (Evans et al., 2011; Vaillancourt et al., 2013). These changes are linked to poor academic performance and maladaptive coping strategies, which further put young people at risk for additional trauma. Over a lifespan, people who experienced toxic stress in childhood had more long term behavioural, health and social problems (Andra, R.F, et al, 2006). For Ethan and Jax, exposure to toxic stress may have altered their brain and bodily interpretations and responses to stress. Increased arousal, alertness and hypervigilance are behavioural symptoms that are associated with toxic stress in childhood (Heim, et al., 2008). In a school setting, a student who has been impacted by toxic stress may interpret benign stimuli as a threat, causing a response that appears to be out of proportion to the event. When Ethan and Jax entered foster care, both expressed a sense of relief. They talked
about the novelty of having their own bed, being supported, and having food. Although the transition into the foster care system relieved some of their immediate needs, it was not enough to undo the past. They still struggled with their behaviour, and still got repeatedly suspended from school.

Figure 1

*Spectrum of Stress Response*

Caleb’s story was different. Instead of describing toxic stress, Caleb described caring and supportive caregivers. Caleb attests to his parent’s support, and the high expectations he was held to. Caleb explained the painful experiences of being bullied, which can be described as tolerable stress - stressful experiences that are time-limited and buffered by supportive adults (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Although Caleb’s experiences with bullying were detrimental, they were limited to his elementary school years, and his parents maintained high academic and behavioural expectations of him. The support and high expectations Caleb felt he had from his parents acted a buffer, or protective factor that helped to shield him from long term negative effects.

It is important to consider that Caleb and Jax shared the same household and parents for many years yet had vastly different experiences. Prior to Jax entering his adoptive family’s
home, he had already experienced childhood adversity that is linked to changes in the developing brain. Although Caleb may have also experienced significant childhood adversity, he did not explicitly describe such experiences. Jax and Caleb both described their shared parents as supportive, but the support the family was able to offer Jax would not undo the experiences Jax already had prior to entering their care. Jax had already faced prolonged activation of his stress response which can alter the developing brain (Bucci et al., 2016). A similar pattern can be seen in Ethan’s story – once he was taken in by a foster family, Ethan felt supported, but he still struggled to manage his behaviour.

For Ethan and Jax, the experiences with suspensions were influenced by two main sources – ostracism and toxic stress. The early experiences of toxic stress are linked to poorer emotional and behavioural regulation in children. This poor regulation of behaviour led to numerous suspensions. At the same time, Ethan and Jax were experiencing ostracism. They did not feel like they belonged. Suspensions perpetuated this feeling by sending a clear message that they do not belong. In addition, their peers were reluctant to engage with them and were treated as outcasts who were “less than”. The increasing desire to feel a sense of belong in pre-adolescence and adolescence guided them down a path where they found connection and belonging with other youth who engaged in antisocial behaviour. They engaged with peers who were also on the margins of society, and participated in high-risk activities (fighting, substance use, criminality etc.). Being involved with this anti-social community perpetuated their suspensions further, which further distanced them from pro-social peers and behaviours. The experiences of ostracism and effects of toxic stress persisted. Alternatively, Caleb’s experiences with suspension were influenced by ostracism and support/high parental expectations. When Caleb was experiencing ostracism, his attempts at coping often resulted in another suspension.
The suspensions pushed Caleb further away from his peers and reduced his sense of belonging. When Caleb began secondary school, it became a new opportunity to meet people and make friends. Caleb successfully made friends, played sports, and acted as a leader in some of his extracurriculars. Caleb felt he belonged. All the while, Caleb was feeling supported by his parents, and felt a healthy amount of pressure to meet their high expectations.

**How Has One’s Self-Efficacy Beliefs Impacted Their Experiences?**

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1997), is described as one’s belief in their own ability to perform an activity to achieve a certain outcome. According to Bandura (1991) having self-efficacy means if one believes in themselves that they have an ability to perform a task, they will be more likely to attempt, and to achieve a desired outcome for the task. This sense of self-efficacy is hypothesized by Bandura (1997) to be collected from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and the interpretations of one's own emotional and physiological states.

The third interview was semi-structured to explore the participants sense of self-efficacy and how it had been influenced by the four different sources of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was intended to be a conceptual framework to help make sense of the participants experiences with suspensions, however, despite insightful answers from the participants, it did not prove to be an effective lens to view their experiences through. Each participant described a fluid level of self-efficacy amongst different situational contexts. They talked about their strengths and weaknesses in school, and how their strengths often coincided with the subjects they inherently enjoyed more. The three participants all described, in at least a few circumstances that they felt they were not able to control their reactions that led to suspensions. Despite this, they all explained that they felt they had control over their lives and outcomes. Even in the difficult circumstances
Ethan and Jax were facing at the time of the interviews, they held the belief that they would be able to overcome adversity. After all, they do have the mastery experience of overcoming adversity on multiple occasions. Ethan and Jax did not seem to source their self-efficacy from external sources. They lacked positive vicarious experiences and social persuasion, but still believed in their ability to succeed. Perhaps Ethan and Jax’s experiences with being excluded and ignored meant that developing self-efficacy from vicarious experiences and social persuasion was less meaningful. If they do not see themselves in others and have limited connection to those who are verbally praising or reprimanding them, these sources of self-efficacy likely have less impact on them when compared to someone who has more social capital. Caleb on the other hand described sourcing his self-efficacy from a more balanced perspective, including through vicarious experiences and social persuasion. Although Caleb experienced exclusion as well, his secondary school experiences were more positive, and he was engaged in the school community. Caleb mentioned how he wanted to follow his dad’s academic success, and how he felt encouraged to stay on top of his schoolwork even when it was difficult. Caleb seemed to have more reason than Ethan and Jax to draw his self-efficacy from all four sources. Caleb’s self-efficacy may be tied to his ability to avoid being suspended for much of secondary school. When Caleb did struggle at times in secondary school, he had positive relationships with his parents and some teachers to draw self-efficacy from. He felt supported and encouraged by these people and this social persuasion may have helped sustain Caleb’s sense of self-efficacy.

Although self-efficacy theory was an important part in the formation of this research, it did not prove to be a lens in which I could holistically view the participants’ experiences through. The third interview contained many questions to help uncover a participant’s self-
efficacy as it connected to their experience with suspensions. Although there was a lot of valuable information exchanged in the third interview, viewing the narratives through a self-efficacy lens was not fitting to make sense of their experiences.

**New Perspectives: Ostracism**

When considering an alternative framework to view the participants’ experiences through, it was too hard to ignore the experiences of ostracism the participants shared. The theme was so pervasive, I had to better understand ostracism to help make sense of their experiences. Suspension in and of itself is a form of exclusionary discipline that ostracizes the offending student, so regardless of all other factors, experiences of ostracism is a reality for any student who is suspended.

The ostracism lens that I have used to make sense of the participants’ experiences is titled *Temporal Needs-Threat Model of Ostracism* developed by Williams (2009). Williams’ framework, seen in Figure 2, outlines three stages a person goes through when experiencing ostracism and the four basic psychological needs that may be threatened by experiences of ostracism. Williams (2009) lists our four basic psychological needs as belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. The first of three stages in the temporal need-threat model of ostracism is the immediate or reflexive stage. This is characterized by the immediate and natural emotional pain someone feels when they are rejected. In the moment, the basic psychological need of belonging and self-esteem is threatened. After the incident, a person moves into the second stage known as reflective or coping stage. The person reflects on the ostracism they experienced and evaluates the context, meaning, and relevance. The subsequent reaction a person will have is dependent on how the person interprets the incident. If the person evaluates the ostracism as irrelevant or minor, there may be little to no reaction. Alternatively, if they feel the
ostracism does threaten their needs of belonging and self-esteem the person will act and or cope in ways that attempt to strengthen their threatened needs.

**Figure 2**

*New Temporal Need-Threat Ostracism Model*

(Williams 2009)

A person’s initial attempt to cope is to try and strengthen their sense of belonging and self-esteem. This is often done through engaging in likeable behaviours, such as being compliant, cooperative, friendly, or humorous. However, if this repeatedly fails, and they continue to experience ostracism, they may begin to feel that it is impossible for them to be included, and subsequently, their feelings of control and meaningful existence become threatened. Then the coping response to ostracism becomes an attempt to strengthen their sense of control and
meaningful existence or visibility. This often manifests as aggressive and antisocial behaviour. Although this often further perpetuates experiences of ostracism, it gives the person a sense of control and forces others to recognize them. Lastly, the third stage, resignation, may occur if the ostracism is chronic, and sustained over time. The person’s ability to cope is reduced and the person is likely to experience feelings of alienation, depression, and helplessness. At this stage people may accept the message that they simply do not belong and are insignificant (Williams 2009). For each participant, I will briefly explore the stories they shared through Williams’ (2009) temporal need-threat model of ostracism framework in an attempt to better understand their experiences with suspensions.

Ethan, Jax, and Caleb’s narratives can all be viewed through Williams’ (2009) temporal need-threat model of ostracism framework. In Ethan’s experience, ostracism was experienced in school, and outside of school. During the initial exposure to ostracism, or reflexive stage, Ethan would have felt emotional pain. Upon reflecting on incidences of ostracism (including suspension), according to this model, Ethan likely felt that his sense of belonging and self-esteem was threatened. Ethan’s hard-working behaviour may have been an attempt to fortify these needs. However, Ethan would chronically experience ostracism, in the form of suspensions and in other areas of his life. Eventually, Ethan’s other basic psychological needs of control and meaningful existence would be threatened, and the possibility of feeling included would slip further and further away. The attempt to fortify the need of control and meaningful existence is often attempted through antisocial behaviour. In Ethan’s case, this meant smoking marijuana, cigarettes, and spending time with peers who regularly engaged in fighting. In a sense, associating with deviant-acting peers restored some of the basic psychological needs, but it further distanced Ethan from a pro-social existence and further ostracized him from mainstream
society. For Ethan, the resignation phase seems to have been met with self-alienation. Ethan maintains a rather solitary existence and remains in little contact with people he once had relationships with. It is understandable that after so many years of being ostracized Ethan may perceive that he does not belong, and perhaps shields himself from further pain by isolating himself.

Jax’s narrative parallels Ethan’s when viewed through the ostracism framework. After painful experiences of ostracism, Jax would try and cope by restoring his basic needs. Jax described how when he returned to his public school, he tried hard to fit in. He wanted to impress people and be liked. However, this was short-lived and Jax would continue to face ostracism. His behaviour declined and fitting in felt impossible. According to Williams (2009), Jax’s basic needs of having a sense of control and meaningful existence was likely being threatened at this time. Retaliating, lashing out, and associating with other people engaging in antisocial behaviour became the norm. Drugs, alcohol, skipping school and stealing fortified some of Jax’s basic needs of control and visibility. Jax articulated how acting out was an effective strategy to gain visibility. Jax explained “You know like the bad behaved kids they get around more. Like if your well behaved you kinda of just fly under the radar and nobody notices you”. Jax followed up though and said “It got me no where. I was popular for a little bit, you know now, popularity is nothing like it doesn’t matter”. This notion hinted that Jax may be at the resignation stage. He also described a sense of alienation from people who were once his peers. When Jax passes by old acquaintances in town he feels judged by them despite no words of judgment being exchanged. After many years and experiences of being ostracized, Jax may have accepted and resigned to the perceived message that he does not belong.
Lastly, Caleb’s experience differs. He too felt the pain of ostracism when he was suspended or excluded by his peers. Caleb described how he tried to be liked by his peers by using humour which could be considered as an attempt to fortify his belonging and self-esteem needs. Caleb also described attempting to cope in maladaptive ways such as gaining attention in negative ways and retaliating. When Caleb gained attention through these maladaptive means, it often only exacerbated his experiences with ostracism. For example, when Caleb retaliated against his bullies, he would be suspended, and then subsequently lose any social interactions outside of his family for the duration of his suspension. Caleb’s experiences of ostracism in elementary school led him to engage in behaviours that would ultimately further ostracize him. Fortunately for Caleb, when he began secondary school, his basic needs were restored. Caleb was able to meet new people, and his humorous and friendly personality attracted friends. Caleb was able to fortify his basic needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence in this new environment. Caleb finally felt included and was able to maintain this sense of belonging in his community. There is no reason to believe that Caleb entered the resignation stage in Williams’ (2009) need-threat model of ostracism.

There has been plenty research that explores of the impact of ostracism and exclusion on people. Ostracism is a common, yet painful experience most people can relate to (Williams, 2007). Even in short, clinical experiments, ostracism has shown to be immensely powerful (Williams et al., 2000; Zadro et al., 2006). Variations of a simple ball-tossing game have been used for countless experiments to study ostracism. In one study by Williams et al. (2000), researchers set up a waiting room that included one participant, and two experimental confederates. While the participant was waiting in the room, a seemingly impromptu game of ball toss emerged. The game lasted only five minutes, and the participant was either included in
the game or ostracized (there was also a control group that did not play toss). The participants who were ostracized, experienced higher levels of sadness and anger. The ostracised participants also reported lower feelings of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. In an adapted version of ball toss that was conducted online (Cyberball), Williams and Jarvis (2006) noted equally strong effects on participants who were ostracized. This was despite the participants never actually saw or met an actual person. In yet another adapted version, Zadro et al. (2004) found that ostracism still hurt regardless if participants were being ostracized by computer generated characters or online human players. Furthermore, van Beest and Williams (2006) adapted this experiment and charged the participant money each time they were thrown the ball. Despite avoiding monetary charges while being ostracized in the game, participants reported feeling just as badly as in games that did not involve the financial penalties of being included. Another adaption of the Cyberball experiment by Zadro et al. (2006) explored the effects ostracism has on people with social anxiety. Zadro et al. (2006) found that the initial reaction to ostracism was equally painful to both those with and without social anxiety, but those with social anxiety took longer to recover from the feelings of sadness and anger elicited by ostracism. Moreover, Zadro et al. (2006) found that participants who were ostracized were more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as threatening. These findings suggest that people with social anxiety can be more vulnerable to ostracism, and people who are experiencing ostracism are more likely to detect ostracism in ambiguous situations. The culmination of all these studies highlights the negative emotional affects being ostracised can have on an individual.

Building on the research of emotional reactions to ostracism, studies have been carried out to explore people’s reaction to ostracism. Studies document that people can react in two distinct ways to ostracism. One reaction is to promote inclusion such as through conforming or
acting in likeable ways (Williams & Sommer, 1997; Williams et al., 2000) and the alternative reaction is to respond with aggression and antisocial behaviour (Twenge et al., 2001; Warburton et al., 2003). An additional study by Chow et al., (2008) investigated the effect of feeling angry or sad when ostracized and how the emotion affected one’s response. The study was another adaptation of Cyberball where the participant was manipulated to think they were either ostracised fairly or unfairly. The participants who were “fairly excluded” were told that their typed response was slow and appeared last amongst others, so they were not selected because they were interpreted to be slower computer users. The people who were “unfairly excluded” were told they excluded from the game because they were a “guy and guys aren’t team players” or because they were a “girl and girls aren’t good at computer games”. Participants who were unfairly excluded reported higher levels of anger than those who were fairly excluded and responded in more hostile and retaliatory ways. The study suggests that there is an important link between ostracism, anger, and antisocial behaviour. Experiences of ostracism undoubtably result in pain, and feelings of either sadness or anger can influence how one responds to the experience of ostracism.

Although the research that has been done on ostracism is valuable and important, much of it has been via laboratory games of ball toss. These low consequential games that elicit feelings of ostracism have had measurable negative effects on participants but studying and understanding the long-term consequences is more challenging. Research on the third stage of the needs-threat model of ostracism that explores resignation has been mostly qualitative which means our understanding of phenomenon has limitations. Some of the most marginalized people in our society are those who have been chronically ostracised – those who are mentally ill, physically ill, homeless, or incarcerated (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Williams & Nida, 2005).
Although more research needs to be done to better understand the long-term impacts of ostracism, it is evident that ostracism is innately painful, people’s coping response is noticeable and measurable and the ability to cope with ostracism is resource limited (Williams 2009).

**Overarching Purpose and Summary**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to document, analyse and interpret the lived experience of youth who have been suspended one or more times from an Ontario secondary school and hear their voices. Although the study was primarily intended to understand the youths’ experience of suspensions from secondary school, the participants’ earlier experiences with suspensions were important pieces of their stories that they repeatedly shared. In the participants earliest experiences with suspensions, they shared they felt frustrated, angry, confused, and that they were being treated unfairly. The participant described how the suspensions did not address the underlying issues, and the problems persisted after returning from suspensions. Despite the participants unanimous consensus that suspensions are ineffective and unhelpful, none of them directly attributed their experience with suspensions to either the positive or negative life circumstances they were currently experiencing. The suspensions were obstacles they faced repeatedly. Other factors and circumstances in the participants’ lives intersected with their experiences with suspension and either compounded the risk factors of being suspended or acted as protective factors.

In Ethan and Jax’s narratives, their experiences with suspension intersected with their experiences of toxic stress in childhood. For prolonged periods of time, their developing brains were subjected to stress hormones and it was not adequately buffered by supportive adult relationships, making it harder to learn, focus and self-regulate. These issues would lead to suspensions and would also exacerbate the academic and social consequences of suspensions.
Alternatively, Caleb’s experiences with suspensions were intersected by parental support and high expectations. Although suspensions were challenging for Caleb, his negative experiences were buffered by these supportive relationships.

Additionally, the participants’ experiences with suspensions were mirrored by their experiences with ostracism. The participants reported feeling as though they did not fit in, particularly in elementary school. The participants experienced peer rejection, rejection from adults, and rejection from their communities. The ostracism Ethan, Jax and Caleb felt ultimately led them to behave in ways that would lead them to yet another suspension. The participants shared their struggles with being excluded, and how suspensions furthered their experiences of ostracism.

The impact of suspensions cannot be seen in isolation. The broader contexts of what else is happening in the lives of students is an important factor to consider when understanding the impacts of suspension. In particular, the relationship between suspensions and ostracism was evident throughout the participants narratives. None of the participants felt positively towards suspension, and in many instances, suspensions exacerbated an issue. Suspensions were an added barrier to the already complex lives of the participants. The relationship between suspensions and ostracism is concerning, and it is also increasingly alarming when considering how other influences in a student’s life, such as toxic stress, can exacerbate the negative effects of suspensions. Without appropriate supports to buffer the effects of suspension, the chances of academic success dwindle, and the likelihood of a student dropping out increase.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study highlight three areas of focus that can be targeted when working with students who are being suspended or are at risk of being suspended:
1) Increase educator understanding of toxic stress

2) Facilitate inclusion from an ostracism perspective

3) Use a strengths-based perspective

Although nearly all empirical studies show that suspensions are not effective in changing unwanted student behaviour, suspensions will likely remain an option for dealing with challenging behaviour for years to come. For this reason, I have not explicitly listed reducing or eliminating suspensions as a part of the solution. Additionally, simply avoiding the use of suspensions does not solve the problem behaviour.

**Increase educator understanding of toxic stress**

In order to fix a problem, the problem must first be understood. Educators should increasingly look to reframe and understand their students and behaviours through a toxic stress lens. This can facilitate empathy and understanding from an adult perspective and create a buffering effect for the student and their response to stress. By understanding the widespread impact of toxic stress on a developing child, educators can begin to understand how past experiences and a student’s lived experience influence current behaviour. Understanding this from a biological and developmental perspective may also help reduce an educator’s emotional response to student misbehaviour. This removal of personalization is imperative for an educator to respond appropriately and in a caring and supportive way that will not escalate the behaviour.

**Facilitate inclusion from an ostracism perspective**

Significant emphasis needs to be placed on facilitating a sense of inclusion and belonging in school, particularly for students who are struggling behaviourally. This study, and the related literature has highlighted how painful experiences of ostracism can be. Williams (2009) work on an ostracism framework highlights the importance of people feeling included, or at the
minimum, feeling as though inclusion is at least possible. When working with youth, educators must understand the impacts of ostracism, and consciously try to facilitate a sense of belonging. Adding extra emphasis on explicitly teaching social and emotional skills should be considered. The fostering of healthy relationships, amongst students, and students and educators could help mitigate the feelings of ostracism and prevent maladaptive coping responses.

**Use a strengths-based approach**

The participants in this study frequently referred to their aspirations, and how they have shifted over time. The aspirations the participant’ have held on to, have motivated them in inspiring ways. In many ways, the participants displayed incredible resilience, time and time again, but it seemingly went unnoticed by educators. The participants talked about being reprimanded and barely mentioned positive interactions with school staff. By using a strengths-based approach, educators may be more able to see students who struggle with their behaviour in a more positive regard and help to acknowledge the inherent strength these students must draw upon day in and day out. A strengths-based approach is built upon a social work theory that aims to focus on individual’s resiliency, resourcefulness, and strengths (McCashen, 2010). This approach also shifts the mindset as seeing someone as “broken” or “needing to be fixed” to seeing a person as someone who is growing and rebuilding. By using this approach, a student can be recognized for their strengths, and work in collaboration to set goals and problem solve. It provides the student with control over their lives and facilitates self-determination.

**Implementing the Recommendations**

The three recommendations listed above; increase educator understanding of toxic stress, facilitate inclusion and using a strengths-based approach, can be implemented on a personal/individual level, but it is also possible to implement these recommendations in a format
that reaches more educators. Faculties of Education should consider a required seminar format class that bring attention to toxic stress, ostracism, and a strengths-based perspective. This would help to expand the ways educators view and understand student behaviour and provide a forum for pre-service teachers to discuss their practicum experiences with challenging behaviour.

Having more educators that understand how damaging exclusionary discipline can be means there will be more educators that can help to make school a more positive experience for youth with challenging behaviour. Although wide scale policy changes are necessary to overhaul the current practice of exclusionary discipline, helping our educators shift their perspectives can be a meaningful step in the right direction.

**Directions for Future Research**

This research intended to focus on youths’ experiences with suspensions primarily in secondary school, however, the participants shared more about their earlier experiences than I had anticipated. The participants elementary year experiences were undoubtedly important pieces of their stories about suspensions. I recommend that qualitative research is conducted with students who are currently experiencing suspensions in grades seven and eight. Hearing the voices of those who are currently experiencing suspension at this transitional age may be imperative to better understand their pressing needs and possible solutions.

Building from this research, it will also be important to investigate current classroom and behaviour management strategies through an ostracism lens. Participants in this study felt ignored and excluded in their classrooms, and it will be important to understand what practices are being used in the classroom that contribute to these feelings of ostracism.

Lastly, it is vital to research intervention strategies for students who are experiencing ostracism in school. From a temporal needs-threat ostracism perspective, researchers will need to
better understand how to help students fortify their basic needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence without aggressive or antisocial behaviour.

**Limitations**

This study was limited to a small participant group of three males, aged 18-23. People who experience suspension go far beyond this demographic, and it is not meant to be representative of all those who are suspended. The stories they shared were from their own interpretations of their experiences. The stories may have been told only partially, selectively, or imperfectly. The stories they shared were the ones they chose to share and were the ones they could recall. It is possible that stories were fabricated, however there would have been no incentive to do so. Additionally, I used intensity sampling, purposefully seeking out participants who would have rich information. Two of the participants experienced expulsions, and all three participants were suspended multiple times in elementary school. Being suspended in elementary school and being expelled are both rarer events than being suspended in secondary school. These participants may be considered extreme cases and so their experiences are not meant to be widely generalizable.

In addition, I set the age limit to a maximum age of 24. I did this to only capture people whose secondary school years began after zero-tolerance policies were removed. However, many of the stories shared by the participants were from their elementary school years. Some of the early stories of suspensions shared by Ethan and Jax would have taken place while zero-tolerance policies were in effect. These early experiences influenced their later experiences in school despite province wide policy changes when they were in secondary school. Ethan and Jax represent a relatively small cohort of people who experienced zero-tolerance policies throughout
elementary school and then “progressive discipline” policies while they were in secondary school.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge researcher bias. I may have inadvertently guided some of the participants answers or my own biases may have influenced the themes that emerged during analysis. It is also possible that participants shared stories they thought that I would want to hear. It would be important to explore the link between suspensions and ostracism through an approach less likely to be influenced by bias, such as through quantitative measures.

**Conclusion**

This study has given voice to three participants who have not been able to widely share their experiences with school and suspensions. The participants were introspective, genuine, and open to sharing their stories. At times, the stories the participants shared were disheartening. They were let down on countless occasions by an education system that was meant to support them. Despite this, each participant was eager to meet with me, a person in a Faculty of Education. They believed that I genuinely wanted to hear and understand their stories and trusted me to share them in my thesis. In order to make change, the perspectives and the experiences of those most impacted by such policies, procedures and guidelines must be heard. The participant voices are powerful and highlight the need to seek understanding of more peoples experience with suspension. Although their history of suspensions was not directly the cause of their current circumstances, each suspension added barriers to the participants’ success. Through analysis, it became clear that ostracism was a common shared theme. The relationship between suspensions and ostracism were bidirectional. Suspensions were ostracising and feeling ostracized led to behaviours that resulted in more suspensions. Additionally, the participant stories were
complicated by either their experiences of toxic stress (Ethan and Jax) or mediated by parental support and expectations (Caleb). Based on these findings, it is imperative that we better understand the long-term impacts of ostracism as it relates to suspensions, and preventative measures to avoid aggressive and antisocial coping responses to ostracism. Additionally, it is important to better understand the impact toxic stress has on developing children and look to ways to mediate the effect. Lastly, it is my hope that educators see the importance of re-framing how they see, interpret, and respond to behaviour. Understanding the impact of suspensions from a student’s perspective can be the starting point for compassionate and informed responses.
Bibliography


Bell, C. (2020). Maybe if they let us tell the story I wouldn’t have gotten suspended”:


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

**First Interview:** How have suspensions impacted a youth’s current employment/educational status?

1) Where you are at now in terms of employment/student status?
   - Did you finish secondary school?
   - Did you go to college/university, or consider some type of training/education?
   - What lead you to this type of work?

2) What you have done since finishing secondary school and how did you get to where you are now?
   - How did you manage the transition?
   - What do you see in your future?
   - Are you still connected with anyone from when you were in secondary school? Where are they at?
   - Who helped guide you down this path?

3) Thinking back to when you were a child, what did you “want to be when you grew up”?
   - How would you describe the shift in your ideas of what you wanted to be as a child and what you do now?

4) How do you feel about where you are at now?

**Second Interview:** What influences a student’s experience of suspensions?

1) How would you describe what your secondary school was like?
   - Who went there? Where did the students come from?
     - Who were the teachers? Where did they come from?
     - Can you tell me about your experiences fitting into the school?

2) In your own words, how did you get your last/most recent suspension?
   - Was this a common occurrence, just this time you were caught/got in trouble, or was it a unique circumstance?
   - How did you feel about it?
   - How did you/parents/guardians/teachers/peers react?
   - How would the principal/teacher tell the story of how you got suspended?

3) Had you been suspended previously?
   - What happened those times?
   - How was the first time you were suspended different than (or the same as) the n\textsuperscript{th} time?

4) What it was like for you when you were out of school on suspension?
   - What did you do?
How did you feel about it?
Did you attend a recommended alternative program, why or why not?

5) What was it like to return to school after you finished your suspension?
   Did you want to return to school? Why or why not?
   How did you feel you were treated by your teachers/peers?
   Did you feel like you fell behind in your classes? If so, how did you manage that?

**Third Interview**: How has one’s self-efficacy beliefs impacted their experiences?

Mastery experiences

1) What were the things you felt you did well with and things you struggled with in school?
   Had it always been this way?
   What sorts of things/skills did you think were most important when you were in school?
   What did your teachers expect of you, in terms of behaviour?
   How did you fair in those skills?

2) Thinking back to when you were in school, when was a time you felt a strong sense of accomplishment?

3) What about a time in school when you felt a sense of defeat, or incompetence?

Vicarious Experiences

1) Who did you have as a role model growing up? What were they like?
   In what ways did they encourage or motivate you?

2) Did you see yourself reflected in any of your teachers? Why or why not?

Social Persuasion

1) Throughout school, who was the most memorable teacher (either in good or bad) and what were they like?
   In what ways did they have an impact on you?

2) Throughout school, can you tell me about the most impactful classmate/peer you interacted with (friend, bully, sibling etc.)
   Why were they so memorable?
   Can you tell me about the impact they had on you?
   Can you tell me about the impact you may have had on them?

3) What role did your parents play in your education?

Emotional and Physiological States
1) Thinking back to your elementary years, how would you describe your general mood as a child? How did this change over the years?

2) How do you think your teachers would have described your overall mood?

3) What do you think your parents/caregivers would say about your mood as a child or teen?
Appendix B
Letter of Information/Consent

Study Title: Exploring the Lived Experience of Youth Who Have Been Suspended from Secondary School: A Narrative Inquiry

Name of Principal Investigator: Adrienne Wilson, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Ian Matheson, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

I am inviting youth aged 18-24 who have been suspended at least once during their time in secondary school to take part in a research study. The purpose of this study is to see the impacts school suspensions have on youth. If you agree to take part, I will interview you three times for one hour each, at a public location of your choice. The interviews will take place over the span of up to two months. The interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. There is a risk that some of the questions may upset you. If you feel upset after the interview, please call the Telephone Aid Line Kingston (TALK) at 613-544-1771. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. Study results will help to inform how school suspensions are used and the lasting impact suspensions may have. You will receive compensation for travel expenses to interview location (i.e. bus fare) and a $15 gift card for a grocery store to compensate you for your time for each interview.

Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. You can stop participating at any time without penalty. You can decline future interviews and may withdraw from the study up until two weeks after your final interview. This means you can have your interviews discarded and not used in the research. You can remove yourself from the study by contacting me at 17azw@queensu.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Ian Matheson at ian.matheson@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77298.

Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a pseudonym in all publications and a study ID number in all study records. The study data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive on Queen’s University servers. The code file that links real names with pseudonyms and study ID numbers will be stored securely and separately from the data on an encrypted USB key. I will keep your data securely for at least five years per Queen’s University Policy, after which the de-identified data will be deposited into the Queen's University's Institutional Repository. The code file identifying your pseudonym and study ID number will be destroyed five years after study closure. The Queen's University General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may see your study data for quality assurance purposes.

I plan to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. I will include quotes from some of the interviews when presenting my findings. I will never include any real names with quotes. I will do my best to make sure quotes do not identify participants. During the interview, please let me know if you say anything you do not want me to quote.

If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.
If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisor, Dr. Ian Matheson at ian.matheson@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77298

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study. Keep one copy of the Letter of Information for your records and return one copy to the researcher, Adrienne Wilson.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

By signing below, I am verifying that: I have read the Letter of Information and all of my questions have been answered.

☐ Yes, you have my permission to audio record/use quotes
☐ No, you do not have my permission to audio record/use quotes

_________________________________________  _______________________________  ________________
Signature of Participant  PRINTED NAME  Date

_________________________________________  _______________________________  ________________
Signature of Person Conducting the Consent Discussion  PRINTED NAME & ROLE  Date
Faculty of Education, Adrienne Wilson, Queen’s University

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

for a study about

EXPERIENCES WITH SUSPENSION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I am looking for volunteers to share their stories about being suspended in secondary school and how it has impacted them. I am looking for people aged 18-24.

As a participant, you will be asked to meet with me 3 times for interviewing, and each interview will last about 1 hour. I will ask you to reflect on your experiences with suspension during these times.

I will compensate you for your time by providing a $15 gift card to a grocery store at each interview. I will also compensate for transportation costs (i.e. bus fare).

If you are interested, please email or call/text Adrienne Wilson.

17azw@queensu.ca

(705) 618-0013
Appendix D
GREB Approval

September 25, 2019

Ms. Adrienne Wilson
Master’s Student Faculty
of Education
Queen’s University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street
West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

Title: "GEDUC-972-19 Exploring the Lived Experience of Youth Who Have Been Suspended from Secondary School: A Narrative Inquiry"

Dear Ms. Wilson:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-972-19 Exploring the Lived Experience of Youth Who Have Been Suspended from Secondary School: A Narrative Inquiry" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.
You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research. Sincerely,

Chair, General Research Ethics Board
(GREB) Professor Dean A. Tripp,
PhD
Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology Queen’s University

c: Dr. Ian Matheson, Supervisor
    Dr. Pamela Beach, Chair,
    Unit REB Haven Jerreat-Poole, Dept. Admin.