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ORIGINAL PAPER

"You Don't Know What's Really Going On": Reducing the Discipline Gap by Addressing Adversity, Connection and Resources

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Abstract

Despite the known impact of exposure to adversity on academic outcomes, the role of adversity, particularly expanded forms of adversity, is overlooked within school discipline. Disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline is known to feed disparate educational and criminal justice pathways, particularly for Black and Indigenous males. The objective of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand the experiences and needs of students who have been suspended or expelled, to inform practice and policy in education. The following research question was addressed: (1) What situations, supports or experiences have positively or negatively influenced the academic journey of students who have been suspended or expelled? Participants ($n = 31$) were recruited through suspension and expulsion programs in two school boards in urban and urban emergent areas of Ontario. Fifteen students, aged 14–19, were interviewed, (male, $n = 11$; Black, $n = 10$) and 16 multidisciplinary staff. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through constructivist grounded theory methodology. Three interconnected themes, exposure to adversity, connection, and access to resources emerged as influencing students who have been suspended or expelled. Exposure to adversity negatively impacted school success, reinforcing biased perspectives of students, blocking connection, and influencing access to resources throughout students' education, including at the point of discipline. The findings point towards the importance of explicit trauma-informed and culturally aware policy that fosters connection and ensures adequate resources for schools, communities, and students most impacted by expanded forms of adversity.

Keywords Expanded adversity · School discipline · ACEs · Suspension · Expulsion · Grounded theory · Trauma · Connection · School resources · Education policy

Introduction

Suspension and expulsion, or disciplinary exclusion, is applied in response to safety concerns and perceived rule violations. In Ontario these include: physical threat or assault; possessing, using or trafficking alcohol or illegal drugs; swearing at authority; vandalism; possessing, using, or trafficking a weapon; robbery; sexual assault; bullying; or any activity motivated by bias, prejudice or hate (*Education Act, r.s.o.* 1990*, c. e.2*, 2017). Exclusionary discipline, however, negatively impacts high school completion, and is associated with lower academic achievement, higher subsequent suspension rates and ongoing antisocial behaviours (Arcia, 2006; Losen, 2015). Particularly concerning is the disproportionate impact on students who are Black or Indigenous, male, identified with special education needs and those of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Finn & Servoss, 2015; James & Turner, 2017; Shollenberger, 2015). While universal policy changes reduce overall disciplinary exclusion, it is increasingly evident that the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline is intractable. In addition to universal strategies, policy and practice is required which attends to students' unique needs and experiences, fosters connection within schools and appropriately allocates resources.

School policy directs disciplinary exclusion practice and is a key factor influencing its disproportionate

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application (Welsh & Little, 2018). For example, zero tolerance type policies direct mandatory disciplinary exclusion for specified offenses and are often credited with fostering the school to prison pipeline, in which Black and Indigenous students are disproportionately streamed toward criminal justice (Curran, 2019). Zero tolerance type policies are in place in varying forms in 98% of US states where approximately one in three students are suspended (Curran, 2019; Shollenberger, 2015).

Zero tolerance type legislation was removed in Ontario in 2007 (Milne & Aurini, 2017). Further changes include adding progressive discipline; restorative practices; a focus on positive school climate, prevention and intervention; and a provincial mental health strategy (Accepting Schools Act, 2012, s.o. 2012, c. 5—Bill 13, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012; Short, 2016; Winton, 2013). Students now must attend school to the age of 18 (*Bill 52: The Education Amendment Act, Learning to Age 18*, 2006). Additionally, all school boards are required to provide an educational and behavioural program through Caring and Safe Schools departments (CSS) for students on long-term suspension or expulsion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Subsequent to these changes, the 5-year graduation rate in Ontario increased from 68% to 85.5% (Government of Ontario, 2019). Suspension rates in Ontario reduced from 3.9% to 2.6% and expulsion from 0.03 to 0.02% (Government of Ontario, 2019). Despite this progress, however, Black students remain twice as likely as White students to be suspended, and Black students are expelled at a rate of four times and Indigenous students over three times their representation in the student population (James & Turner, 2017).

The Role of Adversity

Despite the known impact of adversity or trauma on academic outcomes, adversity is overlooked within school discipline research, policy and practice (Crosby et al., 2018; Joseph et al., 2020; Mallett, 2017). Moreover, students from communities who are disproportionately excluded from school, notably, Black and Indigenous students, are also disproportionately exposed to adversity (Doidge et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2018; Slopen et al., 2016).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are understood as having long-term health and mental health impacts. ACEs are conventionally identified as psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect or abandonment; death of a parent; violence against mother; parental separation or divorce; or living with caregivers who misuse substances, experience mental illness or suicidal behaviour, or were ever imprisoned (Felitti et al., 1998). Conventional ACE research however, involved White, middle class samples and adversities that occur within the home, lacking focus on social conditions and potentially leading to stigmatization of individuals and families (Cronholm et al., 2015; Kelly-Irving & Delpierre, 2019). The definition of ACE has expanded to add peer victimization, isolation and rejection, close network member being serious ill or attempting suicide, exposure to community violence, low socio-economic status, experiencing racism, living in an unsafe neighborhood, and having lived in foster-care (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2020).

Disproportionate exposure to expanded adversity is connected to systemic racism and inequality which is created and maintained through violence, abuse, exploitation, exclusion, and humiliation. This in turn reinforces discriminatory perspectives and unequal access to resources such as education (Bailey et al., 2017; Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). Many Ontario students reside in neighbourhoods with gun violence, violence related to drugs, intimidation, robberies, gangs, fights at school and systemic oppression; amplified in areas impacted by poverty, which due to historical and ongoing oppression, are largely represented by families of colour (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Students exposed to chronic adversity are more likely to experience lower school engagement, academic achievement and self-perception related to their academic competence (Ladd et al., 2017). Youth exposed to adversity are more disengaged from school, which in turn is related to higher rates of delinquency (Bender, 2012; Bethell et al., 2014). There is an established association between problematic behaviour and exposure to adversity and suspension rates are higher in communities with high ACE rates (Blodgett, 2015; Lavi et al., 2019; Taft et al., 2017).

While student behaviours are impacted profoundly by adversity, it should be noted that the primary driver of disproportion within school discipline is not differences in behaviours between Black and White students (Owens & McLanahan, 2019). Rather, differential treatment and support of students with similar behaviours, and secondly, differences in the characteristics of the schools that Black and White students attend, account for more of this disproportion.

The lack of attention to adversity within disciplinary exclusion, colludes with a systemic response that ignores the impact of silent and unrecognizable forms of adversity (Voisin, 2019). How we define adversity renders certain forms unrecognizable, for example, racism and poverty (Alvarez et al., 2016). These important experiences are not conventionally acknowledged as adversity, and certain students are not viewed as traumatized by these experiences. School and health professionals therefore may interpret problematic behaviours as a threat rather than as a strategy to cope with adversity (Thompson & Farrell, 2019).

Differential Treatment and Support of Students: The Value of Connection with Students

Differential treatment of students with similar behaviour is a more significant driver of disproportion than student behaviours, however the two are likely connected. Differences in support provided Black and White students seems to occur primarily among students presenting mid or high levels of problematic behaviours (Owens & McLanahan, 2019). The effects of this disproportionate treatment can spiral for students who are coping with adversity. With less support, problematic coping behaviours are likely to escalate and further reinforce differential treatment. Additionally, disproportionality occurs not only at disciplinary decision points. For example, Black males, the largest subgroup in the current sample, receive fewer warnings for smaller infractions, precluding them from changing behaviour to avoid subsequent larger consequences (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Moreover, disparities in discipline may stem from a disconnect between educators and students, resulting in flawed perceptions of students' lives (Welsh & Little, 2018). Youth from low-income neighbourhoods, labelled in media as high crime, feel stereotyped, often perceived as "at risk", "troublemakers" and "underachievers"; often resulting in disproportionate school discipline (James, 2012; Mosher, 2008). Biased perspectives of Black students and families is persistent, impacting relationships and reinforcing the status quo (Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2019).

Student–teacher connection influences student behaviour, motivation, school engagement and achievement, and fosters more prosocial and less aggressive behaviours throughout life (Valdebenito et al., 2019). Greater disparity in disciplinary exclusion in a school is associated with students' perceptions of equity, school belonging and adjustment problems (Bottiani et al., 2017). Student academic disengagement, defined as a lack of effort, enjoyment, and interest in academic activities, has a direct effect on the number of students referred to school administration for discipline issues (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Toldson et al., 2015). Connection within schools and with communities are therefore paramount (Welsh & Little, 2018).

Allocation of Resources

Pervasive perspectives of Black male students as problems can negatively impact positive connection, and allocation of resources (Howard, 2013). Resources range from brief exchanges in the hall encouraging a return to class, to class sizes, and training opportunities (Owens & McLanahan, 2019). Taking an intersectional view of the historical and structural conditions that maintain disproportion and the disproportionate impact of adversity (Annamma et al., 2014; McGrew, 2016), the allocation of resources should be understood as both the actual availability, and the perception of availability of resources (Sharpe & Boyas, 2011).

In the USA, schools with a high proportion of minority or low income students are more likely to have novice teachers (Losen, 2015). Poor quality teachers and schools influence the academic success of Black male students (Howard, 2013). Having a principal who supports exclusionary discipline, having a higher proportion of Black students, and overall school achievement levels, are consistent predictors of higher rates of suspension (Kinsler, 2011; Ramey, 2015; Skiba et al., 2015). In contrast, higher teacher student ratios are linked to lower rates of in-school crime (Limbos & Casteel, 2008). While there are contextual factors that likely make the school-based experiences of US students different than students in Ontario, exactly how these experiences may differ is unclear as there is a dearth of research on disciplinary exclusion from outside of the USA and on expanded forms of adversity in Canada (Kimber & Ferdossifard, 2020; Valdebenito et al., 2019). This study provides important empirical research on the experience of disciplinarily excluded Canadian students.

The Current Study

The objective of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand the experiences and needs of students who have been suspended or expelled, to inform practice and policy in education. The following research question was addressed: 1) What situations, supports or experiences have positively or negatively influenced the academic journey of students who have been suspended or expelled? Grounded theory fosters fresh interpretations directly from the data, appropriate within substantive areas where there has been little focus (Charmaz, 2014). Moreover, grounded theory and an intersectional approach center participant knowledge (Charmaz, 2014; Choo & Ferree, 2010). Few studies have involved disciplinarily excluded students, fewer still have directly or even indirectly discussed adversity or trauma (see Bell, 2019; Crosby et al., 2018; Haight et al., 2014). Kassam and colleagues (2020) proposed incorporating intersectionality and constructivist grounded theory as an innovative approach when exploring complex population groups, such as the students in this study who have been suspended and expelled, to understand the structural inequalities and complex interactions of vulnerabilities that impact them. The inclusion of adversity is consistent with both an intersectional approach that critically considers all the ways societies foster discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of structural and interpersonal oppression, often involving violence, abuse, exploitation, exclusion and humiliation, (Bailey et al., 2017; Wilkin & Hillock, 2014) and a constructivist grounded theory approach in which the authors prior knowledge is incorporated with the data (Breckenridge et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1998, 2014). The current study addresses a number of important gaps in the literature: a focus on expanded adversity related to disciplinary exclusion (Cronholm et al., 2015; Crosby et al., 2018; Mallett, 2017); research on disciplinary exclusion outside of the USA (Valdebenito et al., 2019); and considering the implications of systemic factors beyond those within schools (McGrew, 2016). Practices that are trauma informed and culturally aware/responsive; focus on connection; and address resource limitations that disproportionately impact students, emerged as particularly relevant.

Theoretical Framework

An intersectional approach promotes an awareness that aspects of social location such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability and age are not mutually exclusive and fosters analysis of the multiple and complex ways that oppressive systems interact and compound across multiply marginalized identities (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015) An intersectional perspective recognizes inequity and oppression across an entire social system, permeated by power, privilege and inequity, which creates and multiplies disadvantage based on intersecting identities (Cho et al., 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality informed a critical examination of the data and centered student perspectives in the research (Choo & Ferree, 2010). A trauma-informed perspective recognizes the significant neurological, biological, psychological, spiritual, and social effects of all forms of adversity, which can overwhelm an individual, family or community (Blitz et al., 2016; Cronholm et al., 2015; Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Fallot & Harris, 2001). An intersectional perspective grounded in ACEs research explicates the systemic inequality that disproportionately exposes certain populations to adversity. This approach fosters recognition of the complex ways that the racial, gender and socioeconomic opportunity gaps found within systems of education may interact and multiply for male students of colour from lower income communities. Moreover, this group of students are disproportionately exposed to adversity, the profound impact of which is more fully understood through an intersectional awareness of the complexities of inequity (Mersky et al., 2021; Slopen et al., 2016). This shifts the accountability from an individualized health problem approach of “at risk” students, towards an historically situated social problem with distinct implications for students who experience adversity (Clark, 2016; Collins, 2015).

Methods

This constructivist grounded theory study involved 31 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2018 and April 2019. Participants were recruited through CSS classrooms in two participating school boards. CSS classrooms provide academic and behaviour support, at separate locations, for students on expulsion, suspension or attending through an agreement between families and their school board. CSS classrooms offer high student teacher ratio, are staffed with child and youth workers, social worker, psychologist, and dedicated administrators. Students receive one-to-one support at their own pace. Students and staff participate in daily group check-ins and check-outs, prepare food, eat and play games together over lunch. Staff connect regularly with families and daily with missing students to check in, offer support and encourage attendance. A trauma-informed approach was not identified, however, CSS classrooms met three main criteria for trauma-informed classrooms: safety, connection and emotional and behavioural regulation (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). Students attend CSS until completion of their suspension, or if expelled, considered ready to attend a mainstream or alternate setting, averaging one semester to one year.

Participants

The sampling frame included all students attending CSS and all staff working in CSS classrooms in the participating school boards. The two boards were selected as they both serve racially, culturally and socioeconomically diverse areas, with one representing an urban intensive city (over 1 million) and the other spanning urban emergent and rural areas of Southern Ontario (Milner, 2012). The sample ($n = 31$) consisted of 15 student participants aged 14 to 19 years. Most students in the sample were male, Black, and students with special education needs (see Table 1). Sixteen multidisciplinary staff participated (see Table 2). Parents/guardians were actively recruited, however, the sample of one was too small for inclusion.

Researcher Description

The primary investigator (PI) conducted all interviews in a private space within CSS programs. The PI, a White, middle age, cis-gendered female, had over 25 years social work and research experience in children’s mental health and schools. The study’s coauthors, one Black cis-gendered male and two White cis-gendered females, contributed extensive professional and research experience related to adversity, marginalized communities and education. Significant consideration

Table 1 Student Participants (n = 15)

Characteristics	Sample
Gender	
Female	4
Male	11
Race	
Black (including 2nd and 3rd generation descendant from African or Caribbean country)	10
South Asia/East Asia/Middle East	3
Self-identified White and 3rd generation Indigenous	1
White	1
Age	
Mean age (standard deviation)	16.6 (SD = 1.5)
Fourteen	1
Fifteen	3
Sixteen	4
Seventeen	1
Eighteen	5
Nineteen	1
Grade	
Grade 9	1
Grade 10	3
Grade 11	4
Grade 12	7
Individual education plan (IEP)	
IEP	9
No IEP or did not know	6

Table 2 Staff Participants (n = 16)

Characteristics	Sample
Profession	
Child and youth workers	4
Guidance counsellor	1
vPsychologist	1
Social workers	3
Teachers	6
Vice-principal	1
Race	
Black	5
South Asia/East Asia/Middle East	2
White	9
Gender	
Female	10
Male	6

was given to theoretical sensitivity of the researchers, which involves the ability to understand and define phenomena, and the relationships between phenomena, in abstract terms (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sensitivity was developed through continual interactions with the data while constantly considering how background, experiences and positionality may have affected the study (Charmaz, 2014; Orland-Barak, 2002). Researcher biases were continually checked through: memoing that explored perceptions, emotional reactions, experiences and existing knowledge; constant comparison of these data with all other data; and engagement with co-authors and additional researchers with specialization in violence exposure (Breckenridge et al., 2012; Glaser, 1998).

Recruitment

The PI introduced the study to the students and staff at each of the six CSS program locations in the two participating boards, and written informed consent was distributed to parents through students. While theoretical sampling guided recruitment efforts (i.e., focused on certain locations based on student body and professional designation of staff) all staff and students attending CSS programs in the participating boards from the period of recruitment were eligible to participate. Active parental consent was required for students under 18. Ethics approval was granted by the supporting university and each school board. Student and parent participants each received a $25 gift card and staff received a $5 gift card.

Data Collection

Data consisted of in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews each lasting 60–90 min occurring from October 2018 to April 2019, and memo writing before and after every field visit, data gathering, during analysis, and writing. The interviews began with broad questions focused on perceptions of school, community, family, influence of life experiences and what students need for success, for example: "can you tell me about your experiences at school, home or in the community before you came to CSS?". Questions became more focused based on the participants' responses. Before concluding student interviews, the PI gathered student's age, gender, race/ethnicity, credit count, grade, IEP status, mental health concern, community or school supports, extracurricular activities, student's strengths and future goals. The definition of expanded ACEs was read to every participant, and each was asked whether, and if yes, approximately how many forms of, adversity students involved in CSS had experienced. Student participants reflected on their own experiences and CSS staff considered (confidentially) all students with whom they had worked. The combination of semi-structured interview and a structured adversity question captured complex narratives of adversity which honoured the voices of participants, as well as capturing the number of forms of adversity which participants may have been reluctant or unable to identify. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the PI, an MSW student or transcription service, allowing intimate involvement with the data and simultaneous interviewing and analysis. NVivo 12 assisted data organization (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018).

Data Analysis

Initial Coding

Guided by symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methodology the PI attended to in vivo codes (a word or phrase taken from the data to label a code) which guided subsequent interviews. Codes that aligned with the expanded definition of adversity, quickly emerged from student interviews though initial codes such as 'violence at school', 'community safety' and 'neighbourhood politics'. 'Connection' was an in vivo code which was attended to and emerged consistently in every interview. Student interviews were line-by-line coded and the constant comparative method was used to develop and saturate codes. The importance of resources emerged. Codes were compared, synthesized and analyzed, guided by the research question. Fourteen staff interviews were line-by-line coded and the constant comparative method (all data constantly compared to all other parts of data) was used, providing a form of triangulation.

Focused Coding

Constant comparative analysis within and across interviews, and theory development, occurred at each step, leading to focused codes and theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014; Connelly, 2013).

Theoretical Coding and Saturation

The consistency with which adversity, connection, and limited resources were identified in the data resulted in theoretical saturation at 10 student interviews. Five additional student interviews ensured saturation of codes and accommodated remaining students interested in participating. The final two staff interviews allowed a form of member checking of the emerging theory as returning to the participants was not feasible due to resource demands on staff and the transitional nature of the program for students (Charmaz, 2014). Four staff interviews and four student interviews were independently coded by two clinically experienced PhD Candidates for trustworthiness and fit of the emerging theory. Trustworthiness was augmented through thick description of the findings. The research team's prior experience provided prolonged engagement, enhanced by data collection over seven months, involving two-seven visits across six program locations for engagement, recruitment and interviewing.

Findings

Three overlapping and interconnected themes emerged: 1) high rates of expanded forms of adversity among students involved in CSS; 2) the importance of connection in schools; and 3) the impact of limited resources.

Adversity

All participants identified high exposure to expanded forms of adversity among students in CSS. Thirteen of the fifteen student participants identified two or more ACEs and seven experienced five to seven distinct forms of expanded adversity. CSS staff corroborated extremely high rates of adversity among the students with whom they had worked. Exposure to violence was common. One student was 11 years old when they and two older friends were jumped while walking to the store for snacks, both his friends were stabbed. This student believes this occurred because they deviated from their usual neighbourhood route "and it was not a good idea" (SD10). This student moved away from the urban neighbourhood in which they had not been safe as a child, but subsequently was forced to return:

> we were broke and we couldn't afford where we were living anymore…I was like,…why the fuck do you want to bring me to [urban area]. We already lived there for a quarter of my life. I'm done it. I'm out. I've moved into the suburbs. I'm out of the hood. (SD10)

Adverse experiences were pervasive, as one student noted when describing racism "It's like that everywhere, outside in the world too" (SD03). Another described repeated interactions with police,

> Every time they see me, they always stare me down. One time…they stopped me because how I was dressed… I was walking, I put my headphones on, I didn't hear them. So, he grabbed me from the back, put me on the floor…put me in handcuffs. I don't know what I was doing, so I asked them, why I'm getting arrested for. So, he didn't answer me. He put me in the back of the car...he checked all my records. And then he let me go because I was the wrong person. (SD09)

Students were clear about the impact on their schooling, "It definitely helped bring out the more of angry behaviour in me. Because I'm getting into fights and all that shit outside of school, so as soon as I get into school I'm always still in that mindset" (SD10).

Addressing Student Safety

For students, the fear of violence was overwhelming, “the feeling that you have to watch your back every day and just knowing the teachers are not doing what they’re supposed to do” (SD15). For many, exposure to adversity escalated in high school, “especially since I’ve been in grade nine I’ve seen a lot…I’ve always found that hard to deal with” (SD11). Many students felt more could be done to ensure safety, one asserted, “They don’t do enough, the school board doesn’t do enough, to stop the fights that are happening…even out of school property” (SD12). One student noted lack of resources combined with fear for safety led to self-protection, “when you feel like you can't talk to people and you have to start putting things in your own hands now and that's where a lot of these problems happen” (SD07). Another noted school was particularly dangerous when students within neighbourhoods felt the need to join together for safety:

> It’s a big group of kids now and it's beefing throughout the school now. The school becomes a very dangerous place now because some people won't take a loss. Some people may come back with a gun, some people may come back with a knife…That is also a part of the school that is also a problem. (SD07)

This complex issue of students needing to protect themselves, often led to disciplinary exclusion, as one staff noted, “…Now, they didn’t jump her yet…How are you going to consequence those five girls who haven’t actually taken action but the girl comes to school with a knife?” (SF07). Students however felt staff in large schools could pay more attention to violence, as one student asserted, “That blind eye game is…what a lot of teachers do…like… ‘I don't know this is happening’ but we all know what’s happening” (SD07). Many students felt safe and less anxious in the smaller CSS setting with “less distraction” (SD08) and fewer people to “watch out for” (SD01). As one student stated, “Regular is whacked. I don’t want to be in that atmosphere. I like this atmosphere. It’s calm” (SD04).

Understand and Acknowledge the Impact of Disproportionate Adversity

Importantly, adversity and its impact was rarely acknowledged for CSS students, which CSS staff noted: “I don't think we really recognize or acknowledge…some of the experiences they go through” (SF10). Students consistently expressed the importance of understanding student experiences, as one student expressed, “ask someone how they’ve been and shit. Like, how is it outside. About their days and stuff” (SD15). Students believed that increased connection led to increased understanding: “teachers have to recognise you can’t judge a person by its cover. You don’t know what’s really going on, why they are doing that stuff” (SD09). Moreover, students felt connection would facilitate communication as one student stated, “if you’re very close with [students], they will feel like opening up to you” (SD09).

Connection

The importance of connection at school emerged consistently across all interviews, This was particularly relevant in light of the amount of adversity students experienced. One student, who spoke of being “terrified for the longest time” (SD07) after experiencing adversity in the community, as well as at school and home, wanted staff to talk to students and understand how such experiences may contribute to a journey to CSS:

> Start off with the small stuff like attendance, outdoor problems, at home problems, school problems or other things. There are a lot of things that could lead to safe school that don't even have to do anything about school to be honest. (SD07)

Bias Negatively Influences Connection

Connection however, had been lacking for students prior to attending CSS. One staff articulated how systemic inequality drove fear-based bias that blocked connection for students prior to attending CSS: “there’s a look of a certain way of these students, doesn’t mean there’s anything to fear. So, I think a lot of it is fear and a lack of understanding of the systemic issues and of the racism” (SF16). Participants also felt that teachers in larger schools were sometimes afraid to talk to certain students, as one student explained, “I think the race of them. Race, how they dress, they never know. The stuff they hear about the news, [teachers are afraid] they have weapons on them and things like that” (SD09). Students were particularly attuned to the ways teachers had interacted with them, “I see a couple of teachers that show… they’re trying to help me. And, I see a couple of teachers that doesn’t want to help me. Like, I notice these type of things” (SD15). One student articulated: “There’s definitely some students who receive less help than others…Maybe it could be based on their appearance or their skin colour or stuff like that” (SD11). Experienced repeatedly, such bias had a cumulative impact, as one student explained:

> a lot of males, gangsters, that are actually really smart, but they don’t really take the time to do [school] because they were taught at a young age that they’re not going anywhere anyways. (SD14)

Not surprisingly therefore, connection with teachers influenced student success:

> I had a few teachers that I really loved, so I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm going to that class. And then there was some teachers that were just so biased, so I'm like, I'm not going to that class. (SD14)

This student was referring to teachers' biases in larger schools, based on a history of problems.

Other participants spoke about bias based on social location, describing the relationship between connection, bias and systemic issues, as one staff noted:

> A lot of the students that come here are racialized students, Black students. So, imagine walking a day in their shoes…All they do is struggle with people who are in power. That's how the connection is. So, they're in the community, it's a high police presence, they're being targeted, they're being carded, they go to school, there are systemic issues in the school...because teachers come in with their biases, they come in with their hidden curriculum, they have their stereotypes that they believe. (SF16)

Lack of Connection Over Time

Most of the students had difficulty finding connections in their previous high schools, as one student relayed, "I didn't have anybody to talk to" (SD04). For students, connection included school staff looking out for them and caring about their success: "I get it. It's my responsibility. I don't know, it's like, at the same time, it's the teacher's job to basically tell the kid to do the work. I have my responsibility and the teacher has their responsibility" (SD09). Students felt that receiving accurate information about their school situation and potential consequences of problem behaviours meant that staff cared, as one stated,

> I feel like they should just be straight-up...if you really like this student or you're really looking out for their future, for their education, tell them the reals, even if it hurts…just do it to help the kid...Maybe it might change you, it might change them. (SD08)

From a connected relationship, such as in CSS, this approach communicated faith in students:

> [CSS] will tell you when you've done wrong. What's most likely going to happen. Not going to keep none of that a surprise from you…They're more communicative with you. They're not always jumping the gun with you and telling you that you're guilty. (SD07)

Students felt that offers of support would be more effective than threats:

> 'I can get you help with your homework and you can still do whatever you got to do'. That would probably be a better motivation, instead of just telling us, 'look, you've got to go to class or else you're going to get kicked out'. (SD08)

Many of the students however, spoke of negative connections and indicators they were not wanted in their previous school, "they were on me every day. Like she said like I'm going to get exposed sooner or later" (SD03).

Lack of Connection at Disciplinary Decision Point

Staff participants recognized the complexities of applying discipline, "we're not saying that they didn't do anything and they just showed up here. Of course, they've done something" (SF16). However, staff explained biased perspectives can influence how a situation is managed: "the way they are looked at is different… the way how one is consequenced versus the other is going to be completely different…based on where they live, who they live with, stuff like that and race" (SF10). Many students felt unheard during the discipline process, as one remarked, "they will hear that I did something and they won't even try to find out if it's true or not, they just suspend me" (SD15). Another student summarized,

> If they look at you and they think that you are a danger, or they think that you caused it. I'm going to say that the reason you see it is because of bias. People are very biased...and they're just like, you've got to go. (SD10)

Additionally, the systemic response sometimes was dependent on the family's presentation,

> So, the kid that can speak well and present himself well, and the parent that can push against in more of a professional way…as opposed to just screaming, hollering, or doing nothing...It should be about the kid and the situation. (SF06)

Effective Connection with Students

A few students described experiencing connections in their previous, larger school. One described, "I used to get in trouble…I ended up meeting with the student success teacher…we had a good relationship. Then, I was introduced to the guidance counsellor…just a bunch of stuff like that… Even though I used to get into trouble quite often, I feel like I was always able to have a lot of support from them" (SD11). This strategy was so effective this student opted to move to a school with a stronger academic reputation. Unfortunately, the new school did not re-establish those severed connections and they were expelled within months. Connection however, could come from many places as one student described, "He's not my teacher…I don't have no classes with him, but I'll still know him. He'll be on me. If

I'm skipping, if he sees me in the hallway, he'll walk with me, 'go back to class'"(SD09). Another had a teacher who created a space for kids, "He wants kids not to be in trouble after school. So, he technically opens [a skateboarding program] it's a big hallway, he'll put the ramps up and he'll just talk to you" (SD09).

Students identified a number of strategies used to foster connection in CSS programs, for example, "when I walk in here, everybody says 'hi'. And they like ask me where I've been, if I miss days and stuff you know?" (SD03). Similarly, another observed, "We have group and check-in where we explain how we're feeling…so that we know…how to interact with somebody on how they're feeling" (SD14). One student noted how effective this connection was, "here… whether it's, I need help, or it's, I need to be left alone, they always generally know. And I don't know how, but they're like some next type of sorcerer" (SD10).

Resources

Exposure to adversity can impact academic outcomes, therefore students exposed to ACEs require more rather than less support. For many students in CSS there were systemic barriers to receiving adequate support. Staff noted however, that.

> supports at the [previous] school has been the biggest struggle that they've had, often not feeling that people ever really understood what they needed…I've not met very many students that can't do the academics. (SF03)

Access to Resources over Time

Students felt that biased perceptions and lack of connection could influence time that was dedicated to helping them: "I do the university courses and stuff they know I am like a smart guy [at CSS], but like if they didn't know that they probably think I am just a waste of time" (SD03). Students were aware that limited resources in large urban schools affected teachers' ability to connect, in turn impacting academic outcomes: "teachers in normal schools, because there's so many students, they don't care. They don't have a personal connection with any of the students. They don't talk one-on-one with every student and explain it in a great, understandable way" (SD10). Another explained, "I wasn't getting any single credits until I went to a safe school" (SD07). This sentiment resonated across the student interviews:

> They…think that just because you're in this class, you should be moving at the same pace…everybody's different. It doesn't mean that you're not smart, it just means everybody's different. (SD14)

Another student had a principal who had tried to connect, however, resource limitations were a barrier, "he has the whole school to deal with too, so he can only do so much" (SD08). Moreover, limited resources in large urban schools negatively influenced students in seeking services, "Well, 1,500 students, I would see why they wouldn't come to me, they would want me to come to them…The lady, even when I see her, I think she doesn't even know I'm one of her students" (SD04). Another noted similar frustrations trying to access after-school academic support: "you'd probably only get like 15 min of tutoring or 10 min of tutoring, because there's so much people that needs help" (SD08).

Providing Resources Past the Point of Discipline

In contrast to the larger school setting, CSS staff had access to resources such as multidisciplinary knowledge, small class sizes and a high teacher to student ratio. Student participants felt these resources supported their academic success, "I'm just coming to get work done, make sure I'm 100% getting the best grades I can, and I know that I can get them here" (SD10). Another student spoke about the importance of small class sizes, increased support and one-on-one attention: "in a smaller environment, I get my work done easier and they just provide everything I kind of need, the support, you know, more teachers around me. I just get more support" (SD06). Students appreciated CSS teachers checking in with them regularly, "Teachers usually walk by you every 10–15 min…Even if you don't seem like you're stuck on something, they'll still come and they'll ask you if you'd like help" (SD07) and "they'll sit beside you and make sure that you do your work…I don't want people to be on me, but at the same time, I get it's good for me because I want to actually graduate high school" (SD09). Moreover, students valued CSS staff contacting absent students, commenting, "someone calls you in the morning and tells you to come to school" (SD03). The flexible structure of the program supported students' emotion regulation and attention. As observed by one student, "The classes are shorter. They give you more breaks. You have snacks during the class which is helpful" (SD04). When asked what had been most helpful throughout their education, one student responded, "this place…there's limited kids here…everybody is helping everybody…And if we need help, we'll just be like, okay, we need help, and she'll help us out" (SD14).

Emotional Support and Self-regulation

In addition to increased academic resources, student participants identified the importance of social/emotional supports to their success,

> And that's definitely why I like Safe Schools…They offer you a lot of the things. They pay closer mind to a lot of the problems. They try to stop the problem earlier before it happens…they will address you a CYW and stuff. It may not look like it works but the small things all add up…I just feel like a lot of schools and stuff, can learn from Safe Schools. (SD07)

Students with emotion regulation difficulties felt well supported in the flexible, small, CSS setting. One student described, "if I'm getting frustrated in work, I'll get mad. So, he will take me, he'll bring me here, we'll talk, calm me down, and bring me back" (SD09). This type of support helped students self-regulate and focus on their work "Like, you're feeling down in the day, they'll come and try to help you, so you're not like that doing your work" (SD08). Although most of the students had not previously spoken about their experiences, they were beginning to at CSS, "If I didn't have that counsellor, who knows, I probably would have still been angry and I probably would have been doing something else" (SD08). Another student shared,

> there's a big family aspect here. I feel like I could go cry in the arms of almost any person in this program... And I have…to be honest, because sometimes it would be like that…people around me are definitely being more supportive now… I'm not alone. There's people that are around me still, support me and it's nice. (SD10)

As one staff articulated, exclusion is an arduous process, "So, maybe if we change that and more have it as, here's an opportunity…students who you recognize are behind or struggling or having a difficult time, maybe do that referral…let's give them the opportunity for a year" (SF16).

Discussion

This study makes a novel contribution by exploring disproportionate exposure to expanded forms of adversity among disciplinarily excluded students. This approach aligns with an intersectional understanding and could shift policy and practice beyond universal strategies that reduce overall exclusionary discipline, attending to the structural and historical inequities that underlay disproportion in both expanded adversity and disproportionate disciplinary exclusion. The intersectional perspective, grounded in ACEs research that was applied in this study, elucidates the multiple and intersecting points of oppressions this group of students experienced. The experiences of expanded forms of adversity relayed by the participants are particularly noteworthy as they are rarely acknowledged as adversity and less so for this group of students. Expanded forms of adversity such as community-based violence, particularly in Canada, are under-researched, and there are significant barriers in gathering this data (Kimber & Ferdossifard, 2020). The current study therefore, provides data on a much needed and challenging area (Kimber & Ferdossifard, 2020). Moreover, as one of the few studies to include the perspectives of students who have been disciplinarily excluded about experiences that have positively or negatively influenced their educational path, the current study makes an important contribution to the literature and provides student led guidance for policy and practice.

Three themes emerged as influencing the academic journey of students who have been suspended or expelled: exposure to adversity, connection, and access to resources. These were viewed through an intersectional lens and understood as intertwined, each influencing the other and influenced overall by social constructs of race, gender, SES, and neighbourhood community. For example, adversity in the form of lower SES determined where a family was able to live, as one student relayed "we couldn't afford where we were living". Biased perspectives of students, influenced by "where they live, who they live with…and race", impacted connection. Connection was seen as influencing the resources that students felt they had access to throughout their education, "some students…receive less help than others", and at the point of discipline "People are very biased…and they're just like, you've got to go". Students asserted that the level of connection they felt in school was influenced by perceptions of them which impacted differential treatment in schools. Moreover, academic outcomes were negatively impacted by exposure to adversity, as noted by one student who carried "angry behaviours" into school. Unfortunately, limited resources impacted connection and school success, "because there's so many students, they don't care". Students in CSS, who were coping with expanded adversity, identified fewer connections and resources before their arrival at CSS rather than increased resources based on need.

These findings are in accordance with research that indicates that the differential treatment that feeds disproportionate discipline occurs at multiple points, and students "notice these type of things". It is critical therefore that teachers and administrators attend to perceptions of students and how these perceptions guide interactions, which students they support and who they shrug off due to resource pressures and perceptions that a student is, as this same student remarked, a "waste of time". Disproportionate access to resources, including teacher attention, which fosters connection, has a cumulative effect, as exemplified by students' response to bias, "I'm not going to that class". Perceived lack of interest in schooling, reinforces ideas of racialized students and those living in poverty as less interested in academics and prosocial activities, which further influences allocation of resources (Howard, 2013; Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011).

The current study highlights the impact of expanded adversity and the importance of an intersectional understanding. People act in response to how they view a situation (Charmaz, 2014). This takes on additional meaning for disproportionate discipline when we consider there is a disconnect between a privileged world view in which adverse experiences occur infrequently and individuals are generally safe, and a world view shaped by adversity (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). From a privileged world view it can be difficult to understand the realities and coping strategies of those who experience inequality and have learned through exposure that the world is not safe and benign (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014).

Implications for Practice and Policy

Policies are needed that support connection with students through empathy based interventions and positive, culturally attuned, supports that address underlying trauma (e.g. Okonofua et al., 2016; Owens & McLanahan, 2019). Universal approaches aimed at reducing overall disciplinary exclusion are important however, they tend to be instrumental and inadequately address broader social inequality or take into account the complexities of an intersectional understanding of the impact of adversity and the racial, gender and socioeconomic opportunities gaps within education (Annamma et al., 2014; Arnett, 2019; Block, 2010; Cook, 2006; Davies & Aurini, 2013; McGrew, 2016). Trauma-informed schools recognize the prevalence of trauma/adversity and the physiological, social, spiritual, and relational impacts on students and school staff (Blitz et al., 2016). Culturally responsive/aware schools teach students about culture, ethnic heritage and experiences of oppression and structural inequality (Blitz et al., 2016). Culturally relevant disciplinary interactions engage all students as learners, send positive messages about who they are, what they are capable of, and foster a sense of connection and belonging within the schools (Marcucci & Elmesky, 2020). High levels of critical consciousness, including awareness of macrostructural forces that benefit White students, can help ensure culturally relevant discipline (Marcucci & Elmesky, 2020). Training and ongoing support can foster a critical understanding of how students and staff are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts (Losen, 2015; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2020). Trauma-informed, relationship-based and culturally/race aware approaches have potential to shift the impact of disproportionate and expanded adversities on disproportionate school discipline (Alvarez et al., 2016; Anyon et al., 2018; Mizel et al., 2016; Welsh & Little, 2018). Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) and the Sanctuary model are examples of culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches (Blitz et al., 2016; Jaycox et al., 2018). To engage these strategies, schools, particularly high needs urban schools, require adequate resources (Anyon et al., 2018).

Strengths, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study addresses several gaps in the literature, most notably incorporating student voices within policy and practice discussion related to adversity within disciplinary school exclusion. This study overcame several barriers to participation including poor student attendance and mistrust of systems. Students who participated were likely those with strong connection within CSS and more often those who were in the CSS program for an extended time, such as through expulsion. Finally, it is not possible to completely understand the impact of the researchers' social location on the sample or data generated. While incorporating staff perspectives is another strength of the study, future research will benefit from parent and guardian participation in discussions of policy and practice. Additional research on the rate and implications of expanded forms of adversity for this unique population of students is warranted.

Conclusion

Although policy and program-based approaches in Ontario have decreased the overall use of exclusion, disproportionality remains persistent (James & Turner, 2017). In light of these findings policy and practice requires a shift that acknowledges the extent and impact of expanded forms of adversity among students who have been disciplinarily excluded. Moreover, the interconnected influence of exposure to adversity, lack of connection and unequal access to resources impacts student academic outcomes throughout their education as well as at the point of discipline. The findings point towards the importance of explicit trauma-informed and culturally aware policy that fosters connection and ensures adequate resources for schools, communities, and students most impacted by expanded forms of adversity.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Consent to participate Freely-given, informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from participants (or their parent or legal guardian in the case of children under 18).

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