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**Disconnect: An Examination of Black Students' Educational Disengagement in Ontario
School Boards**

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Major Research Project Completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Social
Justice and Community Engagement Master of Arts program at Wilfrid Laurier University,
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Abstract

This project is interested in investigating the impacts of educational disengagement on Black students' educational experiences in Ontario school boards. I refer to exclusionary discipline as the removal of students from the classroom through disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and expulsions. Through exclusionary discipline, many students experience educational disengagement, which involves becoming withdrawn, detached, apathetic or uninterested in school or a more general lack of school belonging. This research aims to better understand students' self-understandings about their experiences of educational disengagement, including the events leading up to disciplinary measures, their encounters with educators, and the impact of disciplinary measures on their interests in school.

Significant research in the Ontario educational context indicates that suspensions and expulsions are extremely detrimental to Black students' educational outcomes. A large majority of these findings have been conducted through policy reviews or from the perspectives of authority figures such as principals, teachers and/or policymakers. While many studies have interacted with Black students directly, very few consider how they make sense of their experiences with educational disengagement. I employ Critical Race Theory to contextualize and analyze Black students' experiences with educational disengagement.

Through qualitative interviews with three former students at various Ontario school boards, I present first-hand accounts of Black students' experiences with educational disengagement. The data indicates that racial profiling continues to impact Black students' educational outcomes as well as shape and constrain student educator interactions and relationships. Additionally, I provide evidence that experiences with disciplinary exclusion continue to negatively impact Black students' engagement with education and learning. I also

reveal that Black students feel they are unable to find the space to cope with oppression in their schools which forces them to shift from coping to finding strategies to survive. Finally, I provide a critical reframing of the concept of resilience to demonstrate the urgency needed to shift our focus on Black students' ability to withstand hardship to the reasons why they experience them in the first place.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge the land that I have had the opportunity to conduct this research on. I live and work on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations. As a guest on this land, I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to learn, study and grow. I intend to respect and honour my place within it.

I would like to genuinely thank my supervisory committee for their commitment and dedication to not only this project but my personal and academic success. Marcia: thank you for your continuous guidance and knowledge. Thank you for always knowing exactly what to say. Thank you for pushing me to strive for excellence. You are all I could have wished for in a supervisor and more. Rebecca: from the very beginning, you believed in me. You saw my passion and helped me shape it into something extraordinary. Thank you both for your time and dedication. This project would not be possible without your motivation and support.

To the incredible participants, you made this project what it is. It was your voice I aimed to amplify before I even knew what this research would be. Your dedication to this study has not gone unnoticed and I want to thank you for your collaboration throughout. Together we will make change for future generations of students.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends. I especially want to thank my mom and sister who have supported me my whole life. Your love and encouragement have always been my greatest blessing and I am thankful for it every day.

I also want to thank all future readers. Anti-oppressive work is not a goal to reach, but rather an on-going journey we must dedicate ourselves to upholding together.

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*"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." –
Martin Luther King Jr.*

Introduction

The practice of removing students from the classroom as a response to undesired behaviour is prevalent in Ontario school boards, particularly for students of colour. When students are subjected to exclusionary discipline, they often experience educational disengagement. For this study, I specifically refer to exclusionary discipline as the removal of students from the classroom through disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and expulsions. Through exclusionary discipline, students often experience educational disengagement, which involves becoming withdrawn, detached, apathetic or uninterested in school or a more general lack of school belonging. While there is an extensive body of research on disengagement in education, a number of academics note the lack of conceptual agreement about the meaning of this term (e.g., Balwant, 2015; Fulford, 2017). The dominant discourse about ‘disengagement’ tends to focus on individual or family failures or weaknesses (Fulford, 2017; Dei, 2003) as the main causes of youth delinquency. As Dei (2003) explains, “[t]he individuation of school success or failure allows social science to see homes, families, and their support systems as the sources of schooling problems instead of critically examining what schools do or do not do to enhance and support academic excellence for all students” (p. 245). For the purposes of this study, I draw on more structural understandings of educational disengagement to refer to the school interactions and socio-cultural environmental forces that shape students’ disempowerment and disengagement in school (Dei, 2003).

The purpose of this research is to better understand how Black students make sense of and give meaning to their experiences of exclusionary discipline that result in educational disengagement within Ontario school boards. In particular, I am interested in learning more about how educational disengagement impacts how students think about their own capacities and

self-worth, their feelings of belonging and inclusion at school, as well as suggestions for Ontario School Boards to proactively address the discriminatory impacts of exclusionary discipline on Black students. While there is a rich scholarship in Canada on race and education, there are only a few studies that focus on students' self-understandings of educational disengagement in Ontario. Most of the Ontario-focused literature focuses on policy reviews (Chadha et al., 2020; Zheng & De Jesus, 2017; Bailey, 2017; Bhattacharjee, 2003) and educational outcomes of Black students (McPherson, 2020; James & Turner, 2017; James, 2012). There are some studies that address Black students' experiences of anti-Black racism in school (George, 2020; Anucha et al., 2017; Zheng & De Jesus, 2017; Salole & Abdulle, 2015), but only a few directly speak with the students themselves (McPherson, 2020; James, 2019; James & Turner, 2017; Dei, 2003; Ruck & Wortley, 2002) about how they understand and make sense of their experiences with educational disengagement resulting from exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions and expulsions). It is much more common for research on educational disengagement and exclusionary discipline to collect and analyze data from authority figures, like principals, educators, and policymakers (Levinsky, 2016; Rankin & Contenta, 2009). As such, my project offers a critical re-framing of the research problem by hearing from Black students directly and ensuring their perspectives are prioritized.

Much of the existing literature that examines students' experiences with suspensions and expulsions largely focuses solely on Black students' negative experiences with educational disengagement (McPherson, 2020; Salole & Abdulle, 2015; James & Turner, 2017) with little attention paid to the hard work, perseverance, and resiliency of particularly marginalized students. The emphasis on a deficit perspective that focuses on the negative results that suspensions and expulsions have on Black students' lives is logical and insightful; yet it fails to

address how students negotiate, resist, and overcome these hardships. As Dei (2013) argues, “these strategies of resilience offer important lessons of social and educational change” (pp. 245-246). As such, my study shifts the focus from a deficit-based perspective to a resiliency and strengths-based approach. For instance, how have some students been able to succeed and even thrive in school despite the institutional barriers, exclusions, and disengagement they have experienced in the educational system? It is crucial that we hear from Black students themselves and learn from the strategies they use to succeed in school, despite having to operate within a system that perpetuates inequality.

As part of this shift, my research objectives are twofold. First, to better understand students’ subjective experiences of educational disengagement resulting from exclusionary discipline, which may include becoming withdrawn, detached, apathetic, or uninterested in school or a more general lack of school belonging. And second, to better understand the strategies Black students use to overcome the institutional barriers they face in school and the challenges experienced through disengagement and exclusion. In other words, how have some Black students succeeded and even excelled in school, despite their experiences of disengagement and exclusion from the classroom? The concept of resilience is important here, as it is commonly used to describe a strengths-based orientation to people’s capacities for adaptation and perseverance. However, as I will discuss below, over the course of this study it became clear that the concept of resiliency required additional critical analysis, most notably for the responsibility it places on Black students to adapt to and overcome the educational barriers and hardships they experience on a regular basis.

The Racial Politics of Disciplinary Exclusion

In post-secondary schools, it is widely documented that Black students experience suspensions and expulsions at much higher rates compared to their white counterparts (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Henry & Tator in James, 2012; Tanner, 2021).¹ Studies conducted by Crenshaw et al., (2015) and Epstein et al., (2017) found that Black girls are six times more likely than White to be suspended, while Black boys are three times more likely (cited in George, 2020). While Crenshaw et al., (2015) and Epstein et al., (2017) (cited in George, 2020) both situate their studies in the U.S, these intersections of race, gender, and school discipline exist in the Canadian context as well. Ontario is Canada's most racially diverse province, having the largest number of Black residents (McPherson, 2020). Ontario School Boards are aware that there is an issue regarding the disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions faced by the Black student community (McPherson, 2020) and there is a large body of literature pertaining to Black students and these disciplinary measures within the school boards.

In Toronto, for example, Black students accounted for 31% of school suspensions in 2010, while only making up 12% of the total student population (Anucha et al., 2018). Between the 2011/2012 to 2015/2016 school years, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) issued 307 expulsions, with half being complete expulsions from all schools of the Board (Zheng & De Jesus, 2017). Of these expulsions, Black students accounted for almost half at 48% (ibid). The more recent Caring and Safe Schools Report documents that during the 2016-2017 school year, Black students represented 36.2% of suspensions and expulsions in the TDSB, while accounting

¹ There is a debate regarding the use of capitalizing the W on white. I have selected to use a lower-case w to challenge the association capitalizing W with white supremacist ideologies. However, when quoting other people, I will follow their use of capitalization by reproducing their quote verbatim.

for 11% of the student population (Zheng, 2019). In the following school year, Black students continued to be disproportionately overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions, representing 34.3% in 2017-2018 (ibid). Another study conducted in Durham Ontario found that Black students were “7.7 times more likely than White students to be disciplined, while one out of every 126.6 White students was disciplined for fighting or bullying, for Black students it was one in 16.5” (James & Turner, 2017, p. 18). In a review of the Peel District School Board (PDSB), one staff member observed, “you don’t need data; you just need to see who is being sent to the principal’s office” (Chadha et al., 2020, p.8). Data from the PDSB substantiates this observation. While Black students only make up 10.2% of the PDSB secondary school population, they account for approximately 22.5% of students receiving suspensions (Chad et al., 2020).

The disproportionate exclusionary discipline that Black students face ultimately contributes to challenges that “Black youth face in school and to their inadequate schooling and educational opportunities and outcomes” (James, 2019, p. 377; see also James & Turner, 2017). Other scholars note similar findings. For instance, McPherson (2020) documents an achievement gap between Black youth and their non-Black counterparts in the GTA. In her words, “Black youth are more likely to have low academic performance, be placed in lower academic streams, and experience lower graduation rates than non-Black students” (McPherson, 2020, p.151, see also Dei, 2003). James and Turner (2017) found that students who faced suspensions and expulsions were more likely to drop out of school entirely and often were involved in criminal activity, as they were not at school during the day. For students returning to school following a suspension or expulsion, they often face unreasonable expectations from school authority. These expectations are set out by principals and when students are unable to meet them, formal exclusions increased (Salole & Abdulle, 2015). One way that this happens is by requiring

students to attend alternative schooling programs. These programs represent an alternative method of punishing students who have been suspended from the classroom and they have been described as “warehousing” unwanted students; a place for educators and principals to put students that they no longer want anything to do with (Rankin & Contenta, 2009; Salole & Abdulle, 2015).

The racial dynamics of exclusionary discipline and their impacts have also been observed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, which noted that discipline policies of school boards always disproportionately impact Black students negatively (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Moreover, the Safe Schools Act (SSA), introduced by the Ontario Conservative government in 2000, gave legal force to a zero-tolerance approach to safety within schools, which has disproportionately impacted Black students and made issues much worse for the Black student community in the GTA and across Ontario (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

School ‘Safety’, School Discipline, and Discrimination

Although zero tolerance to discipline matters in schools began in the mid-1990s, it was under Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservative government that Education Minister Janet Ecker introduced this approach in the Safe Schools Act (April 2000), which was passed in June 2000 and came into effect in September 2001. The SSA made changes to the Education Act, “granting legal force to the *Code of Conduct* and giving principals and teachers more authority to suspend and expel students” (James & Turner, 2017, p.8). The zero-tolerance policy outlined in the SSA takes a more rigid approach to discipline and safety problems, making expulsions and suspensions mandatory for serious infractions (James & Turner, 2017) and requiring police involvement for most of the infractions (Bhattacharjee, 2003). While some advocates would

argue that the zero-tolerance approach is colour-blind, empirical data clearly indicates that Black and Indigenous students are disproportionately impacted by suspensions and expulsions (Bhattacharjee, 2003; James & Turner, 2017; Bailey 2017; Salole & Abdulle, 2015).

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledged that the zero-tolerance policy “could have a disproportionate impact on students from racialized communities,” and as a result the policy was replaced with the “progressive discipline” policy, which promotes “in-school detentions, peer mediation, restorative practice, referrals for consultation, and/or transfer to another school” (Henry & Tator, 2010, p. 213). In response to the concerns over discrimination, the Ontario Ministry of Education officially ended its zero-tolerance approach in 2008 (Salole & Abdulle, 2015), though “some schools continue to enforce a zero-tolerance approach to discipline” (James and Turner, 2017, p. 56). James (2012) argues that some educators continue to “take a “get tough” approach, which is evident by zero-tolerance practices such as “time out” at the principal's office, detentions, suspensions, expulsions” (p. 482). Moreover, as Bailey (2017) shows, despite the official removal of zero-tolerance policies, mandatory suspensions (which emerged in the zero-tolerance era) continue to apply today.

Alongside the more hardline approach to school discipline and safety, there has been a significant shift in school security measures. Salole and Abdulle (2015) note that some Toronto secondary schools are looking increasingly similar to their U.S. counterparts. They argue that with security cameras, hall monitors, and police being stationed outside of schools, security-based responses are building an ‘ideology of insecurity’ (Salole & Abdulle, 2015, p.1). While the stated intention of these added security measures was to *increase* school safety, it has been well documented that these measures work to decrease students' sense of safety in school, while also exacerbating the criminalization of marginalized groups (Salole & Abdulle, 2015). For instance,

Tanner's (2021) review of police involvement in the Ottawa-Carleton District Board (OCDSB) found that Black participants "widely described feeling "terrified," "uncomfortable," "traumatized," "awkward," "threatened," "worried," "anxious," "scared," "unsafe," "fearful," "afraid" by police presence in school (p. 45). Students in this school board additionally indicated that the constant presence of police affected not only their sense of psychological safety but also their academic performance as a whole (Tanner, 2021).

In many urban schools across Canada, pre-emptive actions have been taken to "thwart students' potential insubordinate and disruptive behaviours [...] by having security cameras, locked outside doors while classes are in session [...] and enlisted the services of hall monitors, security guards and/or police officers" (James, 2012, p. 481). In a review of the PDSB, Chadha et al (2020) found that there were many instances of police intervention in the schools. Both Black and non-Black members recounted that teachers and principals are "involving the police for minor issues leading to arrests and stigmatization of Black children at a very young age, and that Black children are leaving the PDSB because it is not safe for them" (p.8). A number of individuals discussed one instance where a police officer intervened in a situation, which resulted in a young Black elementary student being handcuffed. In a different school board, Tanner (2021) notes that students, parents, community members and employees in Ottawa-Carleton collectively shared personal experiences "witnessing a young Black student being tackled to the floor for riding his own bicycle, when the police officer at school assumed he was stealing it; of being racially profiled by police officers on their way to school and at places around school" (p. 101). These responses are not only "traumatizing for the young students and their family" (Chadha et al. 2020, p. 8), but they also contribute to the criminalization of schools (Farmer 2010 in James 2012) and, it follows, the criminalization of Black youth. Mallet (2016) found similar

results concerning the effects of increased security in U.S. schools. In the U.S, nearly 6% of all public schools make use of security measures, such as random use of metal detectors, that resemble a prison-like environment (ibid). This type of environment harms learning for all students and can produce fears, negative reactions and worries about their schools, as well as resentment and negative feelings towards security itself (ibid).

The shift to security responses reflects the larger punishment ideology that exists within society and more specifically the education system. As some scholars have observed, punishment in schools is increasingly informed by the carceral logics of punishment, which can be identified in institutional discourses, policies, and practices (Annamma, 2016). As Annamma (2016) argues, “[t]he carceral state is enacted through a commitment across institutions to maintain order through surveillance, coercion, and punishment” (p. 1211). The very fact that schools are making use of surveillance and other coercive techniques to maintain order and safety (e.g., security cameras, hall monitors and police presence) reflects the broader carceral logics of punishment found in prisons. Although the scope of my research prevents me from analyzing this prison-like environment in schools, there is certainly overlap with my research on participants’ experiences and self-understandings of exclusionary discipline and disengagement from school.

With the rise of zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline, there is also a shift in “locating social problems within individual actions and families” (Dei, 2003, p. 245). What this means is that greater emphasis is being placed on individual student responsibility to learn and adhere to the rules of what is and is not appropriate behaviour to avoid discipline (Levinsky, 2016). The ‘responsible’ student is then seen as one who follows and adheres to the rules, while the ‘irresponsible’ student does not. With this mentality, students are seen as “*masters of their*

own discipline” (Levinsky, 2016, p. 365). When students are not following the rules, the focus turns to the students themselves as the problem, thereby decreasing if not eliminating the schools’ responsibility to guide and nurture the student (Levinsky, 2016). As Levinsky (2016) argues, “[i]t was no longer the schools’ inability to produce good citizens; rather, it was students making bad choices which resulted in misbehaviour” (p. 360). It follows that it is the student that must be punished for their misbehaviour as opposed to holding the institution accountable for supporting academic success for all students (Dei, 2003).

Research Objectives and Scope

My research contributes to the fields of education and race studies by better understanding the lived experiences of Black students through meaningful engagement with Black students’ narratives and points of view. Through semi-structured and open-ended interviews, participants share their self-understandings about their experiences of exclusionary discipline and educational disengagement, the process of re-integrating to the classroom following disciplinary action, as well as the strategies they used to overcome barriers and hardship in the education system. This includes the events leading up to disciplinary measures as well as the impact of disciplinary measures on their interests in and attachments to school. The scope of my research does not include the educational or policy-making perspectives of teachers, social workers, principals, or government officials. As noted above, a great deal of research already exists that focuses on these different perspectives. It is therefore important, from a social justice perspective, to collaborate with and centre the voices of those most impacted by exclusionary discipline in schools.

My approach to research recognizes that knowledge is constructed in a context of power and privilege (Mertens, 2008). The principle *nothing about us without us* is widely held in the social justice community as it holds researchers accountable to their research participants. As Dickinson (2018) explains, “The phrase ‘nothing about us without us’ has been used to give voice to the idea that those who are affected by research have a right to influence what is researched and how this is done” (para.1). While my research falls short in realizing meaningful collaboration and partnership with Black students (see Funnell et al., 2020, p. 145), I have nevertheless tried to centre Black students’ voices and recognize their expertise in this study. Although I belong to the Black community, I have never personally experienced educational disengagement resulting from suspensions or expulsions. I cannot speak to how it feels to be suspended or expelled, or the impacts exclusionary discipline has on student belonging and learning. Rather than claiming myself as the expert on this research topic, I am committed to honoring the contributions and lived experiences of participants in this study. My study engages with the resilience, strength and excellence of Black students who have pursued higher education despite being suspended or expelled in their former schools. This is consistent with social justice and community-based research as I centre and recognize the strengths and expertise of my research participants.

Analytical Framework

The following analysis is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerged “as a socio-legal theoretical framework that challenged how race-neutral policies, practices and laws perpetuated racial/ethnic subordination and white supremacy codified by law” (Parker, 2019, p. 2). I chose CRT because at its most basic level it asserts that race and racism have been and still

are defining/determining characteristics that exist in society (Parker, 2019; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Moreover, CRT values and validates the experiential knowledge of people of colour and situates this knowledge within broader structures and relationships of power and inequality (Richie, 2012). In short, CRT upholds the lived experiences and knowledge of people of colour as a legitimate and critical approach to understanding the oppression they face (Parker, 2019).

CRT brings together a number of theories of interest, most notably social constructionism, interpretivism and critical theory, which all contribute theoretical insight to my analysis. Social constructionism is at the heart of CRT. Race is a social construct, and how society understands it is dependent on our constructed meanings. CRT promotes narratives and storytelling by people of colour (POC) as ways of understanding the social construction of race. Allowing POC to share their experiences with racism not only illuminates their very real experiences but can additionally document institutional and overt racism (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Ultimately, when POC share their narratives and stories, it provides others “with a challenging account of preconceived notions of race” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p.11). My research is highly interested in using personal narratives as the basis for data collection and analysis. As mentioned, the use of interviews allows participants to share information at their discretion. These personal narratives are essential to my primary research question, as my focus is on examining how Black students give meaning to and understand their experiences with educational disengagement. CRT theorists place emphasis on sharing personal narratives by racialized groups as their voices are often left out of the story. As such, my research is committed to centering the voices of the Black student community and listening to their personal narratives. Centering their experiences and ideas is of utmost importance to my study and is supported by the constructionist lens found within CRT. Through interviews, this collaboration and discussion of lived experiences has the

potential to uncover discriminatory practices as they pertain to Black students' experiences with educational disengagement.

Second, interpretivism brings focus to the meanings that people assign to their experiences. Interpretivism suggests that we are “actively engaged in constructing and reconstructing meanings through our daily interactions” (Leavy, 2017, p. 13). We make and remake our social world through our interpretive processes and patterns of interaction (Leavy, 2017). Here we assign meaning to events, activities, gestures, and all other experiences (ibid). This relates to my research as I am interested in examining the meanings that Black students have given to their experiences of educational disengagement. For instance, one of my interview questions asks students how being removed from the classroom has impacted their educational experiences. The meanings that individual participants have of their experiences are diverse, and CRT values and illuminates the diversity of knowledge of racialized communities. It is important to focus on participants' assigned meanings to their experiences because it will provide insight on the effects educational disengagement has had on their educational experiences and the strategies they have used to further their education.

Finally, CRT offers a critical lens, which situates people's personal narratives, lived experiences and meaning making processes in relation to broader structures of power that shape and constrain what people can do and can say. For instance, consider the role of “whiteness” in the education system. Tanner (2018) notes that multicultural agendas in schools (i.e., equity missions) are largely influenced by neoliberal trends that often uphold white supremacist ideologies. As Tanner (2018) argues, “The critiques of multiculturalism are not new, and many scholars have pointed to the various limitations of a concept that in its very etymology contains an aged conception of culture that cannot but re-inscribe colonial essentialism (Gaztambide-

Fernández, 2012, p. 43)” (p. 3). White supremacy continues to exist as an “ongoing legacy of colonial essentialism” and continues to uphold whiteness as “the cultural ideal” (Tanner, 2018, p. 3). It is quite possible that multicultural initiatives may produce unintended outcomes that promote the exact opposite of multiculturalism. For example, “white supremacy is reaffirmed even when educators, especially white educators, simply acknowledge the existence of white privilege without actively working to disrupt white supremacy” (McWhorter in Tanner, 2018, p. 3).

The Whiteness of Education: ‘The White Way’

“All systems create what they were designed to create, sadly, the education system has been designed to weed out, to discriminate and to provide success for kids of privilege.”

- *Miriam Rollin*

The classroom can be an incredible space where cultivation and learning operate to promote student success. However, the classroom may also exist as a space in which students feel unwelcome and unsafe to even exist, let alone to explore their full learning potential. When considering racialized students, these experiences of distress can be connected to the broader context of whiteness in education. The dominance of whiteness not only exists in education today but must be contextualized within the institution’s very foundation. Although many efforts have been made to combat and dismantle the dominance of whiteness in education, its deep roots remain and continue to disadvantage students of colour. As Haynes (2017) notes, “the classroom therefore, like all racialized structures, cultivates white supremacy (i.e., normalcy, advantage, privilege, and innocence) through the perpetuation of structures, processes, and traditions that

reinforce racial subordination” (p. 88). Dr. Frances Ansley notes that white supremacy continues to act as:

a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings (cited in Collins, 2021, p. 44).

This concentration of power and resources may appear within the education system through the overwhelmingly white stakeholders “who create curricula [...] determine school funding and, yes, teach” (Collins, 2021, p. 44). White dominance often occurs through the enforcement of policies, most notably one’s involving punishment (Collins, 2021). This brief conceptual understanding of whiteness in education provides the overarching framework that will be utilized in the analysis portion of this paper. It will become clear through my data that whiteness continues to exist in education and continues to impact Black students in undesirable ways.

CRT situates Black students' personal narratives, lived experiences and meaning making processes within this context of whiteness in the education system. CRT is therefore a useful framework for my research because it situates the search for understanding Black students' experiences of disengagement in school within “the institutionalized policies and practices of exclusion and marginalization that organize public schooling and characterize the off-school environment of many students” (Dei, 2003, p. 249).

Methodological Framework

Given that my research questions are centrally concerned with exploring how Black students understand their experiences with educational disengagement and exclusionary discipline, my research study employs a qualitative, critical race methodological approach. A qualitative methodology seeks to research “value depth of meaning and people’s subjective experiences and their meaning making processes” (Leavy, 2017, p.124), producing rich, descriptive data (Leavy, 2017). This aligns extremely well with the overarching goals of my research to explore and centre the firsthand accounts of Black students’ lived experiences. This approach requires qualitative methods to ensure that participants’ voices are present in the research in the most descriptive manner possible.

My approach was also informed by a critical race methodology, which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue in the context of education is an “approach that foregrounds race and racism in all parts of the research process” (cited in Parker, 2019, p. 7). This includes the beginning stages of drafting a research problem and research questions as well as how the study proceeds, data/collection/analysis and finally the conclusion (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Race and racism have been considered in all components of my research. My research places emphasis on acknowledging that discrimination and oppression are pervasive, and it was a priority for me to reframe the power imbalance that continues to inform much quantitative and qualitative fields of research.

Using semi-structured and open-ended questions, participants had the opportunity to provide long and detailed responses in a language that was most comfortable to them, guiding the interview and their response to questions in whatever direction they wished (Leavy, 2017). Since the interviews were conducted online (via Microsoft Teams), I was able to interview

participants that lived far away. Online interviews also tend to have similar benefits as face-to-face interviews (genuine conversations, ability to capture emotions, ability to clarify or ask probing questions, etc.) (ibid). This is especially important given the current climate of COVID-19. Conducting interviews through this approach allowed participants to engage in the interview process in a setting that was most comfortable to them. Participants also had the added comfort of deciding if they would like their cameras on or off for the duration of the interview, which is not possible in face-to-face interactions.

By using semi-structured interviews with participants, we were able to use conversation as a learning tool (Leavy, 2017). Using conversations as a tool for research can also alter the power dynamic between myself and participants by intentionally sharing power and allowing participants to shape the interview based on events and details that are important to them. Participants have the power to decide what they wish to disclose, and it is their voices and experiences that are amplified throughout my research. This is extremely important as my research acknowledges the role that discrimination and oppression play in Black students' lives and is committed to principles of mutual reciprocity and collaboration with participants.

My interview guide consists of two overarching themes: students' understanding and experiences of educational disengagement, and students' resilience to educational disengagement. I included an additional theme surrounding student's reintegration to the classroom, to utilize if time permitted. These themes each had several open-ended questions to guide the discussion. I conducted individual interviews with three former Ontario high school students who self-identify as Black. All three participants had attended or are currently attending post-secondary school and are between the ages of 17 and 24. None of the participants had personal experience with expulsions, but two of the three participants had been suspended in

high school. One participant received one suspension, one participant received more than one suspension, and one participant had no personal experience with suspensions during their time in high school. Although it was a requirement to have received at least one suspension or expulsion to participate in this research, I made the decision to include this participant in the research given the difficulties I experienced with recruitment and the valuable experiences of the participant concerning the intersection of discipline and citizenship that aligned well with the research topic. Each interview lasted approximately fifty to sixty minutes in length and each participant was given the option to use their own name or a pseudonym within the study. The names participants chose are Chika, Daisy and Nathan.

Following the process of transcribing each interview verbatim, I used an open coding thematic approach, whereby:

the researcher is identifying distinct concepts and themes for categorization. The first level of data is organized by creating initial broad thematic domains for data assemblage [...] researchers would read and re-read interview transcriptions... and associated data sources involved in the data collection searching for thematic connectivity leading to thematic patterns (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 48).

I specifically looked for general themes in each interview that related to my research questions and then cross-referenced these themes between the three interviews searching for overlap. The themes identified include racial profiling, student's perspectives on educational disengagement as well as resilience. Each theme was given a unique colour and then used to code the interviews.

Analysis

“Critical race theory focuses on racism being so embedded in society that it appears “normal” for many” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26) and “calls our attention to the fact that while race is a socially constructed phenomenon, racism and its insidious impacts are real and commonplace” (Salisbury, 2021, p. 201). In education, the normalization of racism manifests through white dominance. From the perspective of my participants, white dominance impacted their experiences of discipline in every level of Ontario education. Grounding this analysis in CRT and white dominance in education, illuminates the very real experiences of my participants and how whiteness informs these educational experiences. The premise that “society is fundamentally racially stratified and unequal, where power processes systematically disenfranchise racially oppressed people” (Hylton, 2012, p. 24) is central to CRT and key to understanding the results produced within this study.

Racial Profiling

It was kind of like an eye opener to the real world, that no matter what you do, you have to work ten times harder as a Black man to *prove* that you're innocent compared to everyone else (interview with *Nathan, Former PDSB Student*).

I begin this section with a quote from one of my interview participants, Nathan, who shares his thoughts on how he understands his racial identity as shaping his experience with school discipline. This quote speaks directly to the added pressure Black student's face in the education system. Not only are Black students being challenged with the “typical” student pressures from school, but they also face additional race-based challenges that white student's do not.

Eberhardt (2020) notes that Black students are more often categorized as a collective compared to as individuals. What then becomes concerning are the negative thoughts and assumptions associated with their collective group, which are undoubtedly informed by the larger dominant ideology surrounding the Black community. Maynard (2017) notes that “Black students are not only treated as if they are inferior, but they are also frequently treated as if they are a threat inside education settings. [...] their movements are closely monitored and subject to correction” (para 12). These findings are reinforced in my data when Nathan describes his experiences with authority figures. He describes how police spent a lot of time at his school and were constantly questioning his peer groups’ whereabouts. It has been documented that racial bias plays a role in police student interactions in schools (Tanner, 2021; Chadha et al., 2020) and my data further supports this claim. The negative stereotypes associated with the Black student community not only influence why police officers tend to spend more time questioning students like Nathan, but also why they are there in the first place.

These assertions or assumptions also influence how and why Black students are being suspended. In the literature it is widely discussed that Black students are being suspended for more “subjective” offenses where there is more leeway for racial bias to play a role in the decision-making process (Bhattacharjee, 2003). For example, reports indicate that Black students are being suspended for reasons such as being disrespectful to teachers or questioning the authority of school officials (ibid). In all suspensions discussed throughout my interviews, participants' experiences aligned with this discussion. While one participant was suspended for attempting to take another student’s position on the student council (in which there was no way to prove the allegation), another was suspended for leaving class as well as unknowingly using one dollar’s worth of counterfeit money in the cafeteria to buy a cookie. Further, examples in

Ontario include James and Turner's (2017) study where they discuss how Black students are disproportionately suspended for being late, laughing in class, and talking back to teachers. In their study (ibid), one student discussed her first-hand accounts of the differential treatment between Black and white students, noting:

A white kid with mood swings would get in class suspension. A Black kid behaving the same way would “have an attitude” and get a suspension. White students get the chance to talk to the social worker; Black students get suspended (p. 57).

It is important to note that in-class suspensions keep students in school and doing work but isolates them from the rest of the student body (Kampen, 2019). Out of school suspensions remove the student from the school entirely for the duration of their suspension.

Sibblis (2014) additionally notes that white students are more often disciplined for “smoking, leaving without permission, obscene language, vandalism (Brown 2007)” while “Black students are more likely to be disciplined for disrespect, excessive noise, threats and loitering (Skiba et al., 2002)” (p. 66). Chadha et al. (2020) additionally note that Black students, parents, and members of the PDSB indicate “that some teachers use any excuse to exclude Black students from the classroom and some principals use any excuse to suspend Black students from schools: hoodie—suspension, hoop earrings— suspension, doo rag—suspension’ (pp. 8-9).

When considering this discussion within the larger framework of CRT, its interpretivist lens brings focus to the meanings that people assign to their experiences. In the case of Black students' suspensions, there appears to be a common trend amongst the reasons as to *why* these students are being suspended compared to white students. Munroe (2021) notes that Black students have discussed how negative words teachers use to describe perceptions of them explain why they are quite often “criticized for behaviours that are rarely pointed out in their white

peers” (para 6). Black students share that they are labelled as “rebellious” and/or having “attitude adjustment issues” (Munroe, 2021, para 6). For instance, in my interview with Nathan, he stated that “Without a doubt we were labeled”. He then explained that:

“Whenever I started getting suspended, I was lumped into that label as thugs, but it was kind of funny because all my friends who were getting suspended were all in academic classes. We were always in summer school together. So, it’s like we were always in school, we all went to university. But in high school no matter what we did, or how we dressed... we were labeled as thugs”.

Nathan was clear that even though his teachers were very careful with their wording (telling him and his friends to stop being thugs), he notes “in order for you to stop being a thug, you have to already be a thug”.

Racial bias underpins a significant number of teacher-student interactions and continues to negatively impact Black students. Eberhardt (2020) notes, “Bias can also influence how teachers discipline students... I have found that teachers express a desire to discipline a Black ... student more harshly than a white for the same repeated infractions” (para. 5). Eberhardt (2020) found that teachers often “treat Black students as a group but white students as individuals” (para 5). This emerged in my findings as well. In my interview with Daisy, she noted that her suspension was “for something positive, not even negative.” In this instance, Daisy was suspended for suggesting a Nigerian celebration at her school. In Daisy’s case, she was accused of trying to take over the presidential role on her student council when she suggested taking the lead on this cultural event she brought forth to the group. Daisy was accused of bullying and her principal stated that it was her word against the others. It’s plausible that implicit bias clouded her principal’s decision to suspend her as there was no concrete evidence to suggest that Daisy

did what the other students suggested. A white principal taking the word of white students over a Black student does raise cause for concern. There are endless routes this discussion could take as to where and how these labels and biases emerged, but what is more important is the fact that they continue to be perpetuated throughout the education system today.

Interpretivism would suggest that these educators have assigned meaning to their general experiences with Black people through their own and shared experiences with others. As Leavy (2017) suggests it is through our social world that we understand and assign meanings to our experiences. When adding bias to the mix of general assigned meanings, this becomes especially dangerous for the Black students on the receiving end of educators assigned meanings. These constructed meanings not only shape how educators act, but more importantly react to Black students' behaviours. When considering subjective offences in suspensions, this is extremely concerning as there is more leeway for racial bias to influence outcomes. As demonstrated within the literature and my findings, racial bias continues to influence Black students' experiences with suspensions.

Since my study focuses on better understanding how Black students make sense of and give meaning to their experiences of exclusionary discipline, it is important to note that in all scenarios, participants disclosed that they could not understand why they were suspended. Both participants felt their actions were unworthy of suspensions and indicated countless negative outcomes that resulted from this type of punishment. Participants articulated that their race played a role in their experiences within all levels of discipline including experiences with teachers and principals prior to their suspensions, the process of being suspended as well as their treatment post suspensions. When asked why he thought he was suspended, Nathan responded:

I couldn't really tell you why I was suspended for a week, I guess maybe it's because I

took a long washroom break, that is the worst thing that I did. I took a long washroom break. I asked to go to the washroom, and I ended up doing other things besides going to the washroom. But for a week's suspension, where I wasn't physical, and people were trying to be physical to my cousin, it was very odd to me that I was the only one who got in trouble compared to everyone else.

Daisy notes, "Personally to me, I didn't feel like I needed to be suspended for what I did, because I didn't know I was doing it... I think it's just because I said I should probably take the lead because it's a cultural thing".

It became abundantly clear that participants understood the negative impact their race played in their experiences. Daisy noted "I really don't want to say it like this, but I know this wouldn't have happened if I was white". She then shared, "probably none of this would have even happened if I was just white and didn't have any cultural aspects to a party or anything." Daisy noted, "so I think that my racial identity definitely affected the whole situation". Nathan shared, "it kind of showed me that there's a cruel world being a Black individual in a predominantly white world."

Chika shared a unique perspective as an international student which considered the intersections of race, discipline, and citizenship. Since Chika was attending school in Ontario on a VISA, she explained that "as someone who is from Africa and someone who is also Black and an international student, it's sometimes very hard to get a visa to come to school and everything". In turn, getting suspended or expelled posed very serious threats to her and her fellow African peers. She noted that "we as African students, we always just try to, you know, try and do things that the school would want, just follow the rules and not get in trouble."

This mentality of following school rules to avoid punishment plays into the larger ideology of CRT's tenet of whiteness as property. As Salisbury (2021) notes, "whiteness functions as property through schools' rewarding of white cultural practices, white norms and white epistemologies" (p. 203). It is when students' behaviours align with white norms and expectations that they receive awards while being deemed deviant when practicing cultural normative behaviours of communities of colour (Salisbury, 2021). This was further presented in my data when Daisy spoke to her experiences being suspended for promoting a cultural event. As Haviland (2008) notes, "White teachers in White-dominated educational settings are indeed likely to "gloss over" issues of race, racism and white supremacy" (p. 40) as was arguably the case in Daisy's situation. Rather than unpacking the scenario to uncover the racialized dynamics and stereotypes informing this situation, like representing Black women as overly aggressive, angry, and in this case, bullying, Daisy's principal took the word of her white peers at face value with no critical lens.

Disconnect: Black Student's Perspectives on Educational Disengagement

There is no denying that concern and fascination over school disengagement are not new (Dei, 2003). However, this remains an important discussion in today's educational climate as students continue to experience disengagement. Participants generally articulated that these feelings of disengagement were largely impacted and intrinsically influenced by the dominance of whiteness in education. The core themes that emerged when discussing disengagement largely related to feelings of disconnection between the curriculum, teachers, and staff.

It has been widely documented that whether consciously or not, many teachers approach Black students' potential through a deficit perspective (Lopez & Marie, 2021; Reed, 2020;

Douglas et al., 2008). “Most often associated with White teachers, this approach does not assume Black students’ potential but aims to compensate for what is presumed missing from the student’s background” (Douglas et al., 2008, p. 48). This perspective can create feelings of disconnect between students and teachers. Data within my findings highlight that some teachers utilized this perspective when approaching the participants within my study. For instance, consider Chika’s example when speaking about houses in Nigeria and Canada. When discussing beautiful homes her teacher said “*oh look at this beautiful house. You don’t have the same in Nigeria, right?* In this exchange, *regardless of intent*, Chika’s teacher created even more of a disconnect between them in saying such “blatantly ignorant things” (Interview with Chika). Rather than understanding and learning from Chika, her teacher incorrectly assumed that Chika’s Nigerian home was unlike Canadian ones by alluding to the perception that something was “missing” by questioning if Nigeria *even had* houses like in Canada. This deficit and racist perspective additionally emerged when Chika discussed experiences with her white peers. While attending a model UN event at her school Chika noted that a peer spoke about AIDS in Africa and “how we’re dumb, and we just don’t even exist as people”. These examples can both be understood through the perspective of white dominance in education. Douglas et al. (2008) note that many teachers “work from within a hegemonic, Western, epistemological framework, which often predisposes them to have lower expectations of Black students” (p. 49). This is especially concerning as this creates deep feelings of fear and mistrust in the classroom as was highlighted in my interview with Chika when she noted that she felt scared at her school because she felt that there were very few people who could understand her. This becomes even more alarming in predominantly white schools where students have very few people who understand and can relate to their experiences being Black.

As Pyne (2018) notes, “[e]ngagement in school has behavioural and emotional components. The behavioural components are composed of normative actions in school; the emotional components (also known as school attachment) are students’ affective responses to the learning environment” (p. 61). When students begin to feel apathetic towards school and learning, it follows that they become less engaged with education as a whole. In my findings, Daisy notes that before being suspended she was a straight A student. Upon returning to school after her suspension she struggled with her grades and barely passed. Daisy indicated that her learning environment greatly shifted after her suspension. In her words: “I didn’t feel very good about myself every time I was there... and every time I left, I had this sigh of relief, like oh this is over.” When considering Black students’ experiences with school engagement or lack thereof, their race plays a large role in understanding their outcomes. Pyne (2018) suggests that “students emotionally withdraw when they do not identify with school or they believe teachers and peers do not accept them” (p. 61). When Black students are in predominantly white schools, (as was Daisy’s case) it is extremely difficult to truly experience feelings of acceptance. Daisy noted that before her suspension her teachers did not pay her much attention: “Like they paid attention to me as a student, but they never really paid attention to me as a *Black African* student. Right?”. However, following her suspension she felt the shift from being seen as a student to a Black African student. She notes:

I think they started noticing things that they otherwise didn’t about my appearance and my personality... they started to be, like I don’t want to say conscious, but they became more aware of the things I did and how I did them.

Even though Daisy felt disconnected to some of her teachers before being suspended, she felt significantly more so following her suspension. This shift to viewing Daisy as a Black African

student upon returning from her suspension illuminates the complexities of race and discipline for Black students. Although Daisy experienced the educational climate as a racialized student before her suspension, she experienced teachers noticing and treating her differently after being suspended. She noted that after her suspensions her teachers who once permitted her to be culturally expressive began to gradually restrict her cultural identity. For instance, her teachers no longer allowed her to wear her Nigerian accessories to class as they were deemed too bright and distracting for the classroom. This type of surveillance and controlling behaviour that teachers exercise toward Black students contributes to Black students' feeling unwelcomeness, not belonging, and thus disengaged from school and learning.

Further, as Pyne (2018) notes, "Deviance and subsequent negative outcomes result not only from worsening behaviours but also from worsening relationships that lead to differences in the ways individuals perceive themselves and are perceived and treated by others" (p. 61). Nathan shared that his teachers and principals were constantly questioning and investigating him and his friends. He noted:

If something went missing, they'd always come to our locker room. Or if there was something that smelt illegal, they'd always come to our locker room and automatically know who to go look because we were deemed as the troublemakers.

He then shared "They were always questioning us about where we're supposed to be or if we're getting in trouble or if we were outside in a group, if we're going to go do something illegal. It was border line harassing, harassment." Okonofua et al. (2016) claim that students' negative behaviours and attitudes relating to school often worsen "through a 'vicious cycle' of stereotyping and mistrust that plays out as school relationships break down through continued disciplinary actions" (cited in Pyne, 2018, p. 61). As previously mentioned, Nathan shared that

he and his friends were labelled as thugs from a young age. Through this stereotyping paired with the mistrust Nathan felt towards many of his teachers, it is no wonder Nathan felt disconnected from school. Nathan shared that his secondary school felt like jail; with dull school colours, police and principals patrolling the halls. He shared that his feelings towards learning were impacted by this type of hyper surveillance within his school and that it was exceptionally challenging to feel connected to his education when he always ended up in the wrong. He noted that in both suspensions he faced, more trust was lost between himself and his principals making his learning experiences less desirable.

Another key theme that emerged in participants' discussions was the lack of trust diminishing between themselves and their educators. Daisy notes that although some of her teachers asked if they could help and that she could talk to them if she would like, she could not trust them because they were white. As interpretivism suggests, we are constantly in a process of constructing and reconstructing our daily interactions to assign meaning to these experiences. Before her suspension, Daisy felt that her principal was someone in the school that was relatively understanding. However, after her interactions surrounding her suspension, it was clear that Daisy put her guard up not only to this principal, but to all the white teachers at her school. This interaction demonstrated to Daisy that trusting white educators would be difficult moving forward. In her predominantly white school, this was a challenge. This interaction continues to impact her today in university. She notes that most of her professors are white and that there is still distrust despite her ongoing personal attempts of reshaping her views. She shares that she tries not to relate her experiences in secondary school to her current schooling, but she finds that she does not ask as many questions in class as she had before her suspension in secondary school.

In a similar situation, Nathan shares how his trust was lost. He explains:

We kind of developed a relationship with the higher authorities in the school that they're looking for us to do something wrong and then we don't really trust them because they're always insinuating that we're going to be doing something wrong so we couldn't really talk to them.

He mentioned that he felt that there were few people who he could trust and confide in at the school. Consider his thoughts on his vice principal for instance: "they're supposed to be there to give you advice and it's kind of hard to go ask them for their advice or their opinions when they're already biased or what not." Similar to my above thoughts on Daisy's understanding, Nathan's diminished trust can be explained by his previous interactions with educators. He notes that even when given the opportunity to share his side of the story in one of his suspensions, it did not matter because his principal was poking holes in it. He shared that he felt like he could not do anything right because whatever he did, his principals and/or teachers would try to poke holes in his stories and prove that he was in the wrong. He shared that this diminished any kind of relationship he had with his principal. These interactions shaped Nathan's relationships with educators as these were major stand-out experiences that he assigned meaning to. Only Nathan can say what these meanings are, but nonetheless these meanings were developed and continued to impact his interactions moving forward in education. As Nathan shared, trust was diminished. This makes for a very difficult learning environment where students should feel safe to explore themselves, which can only be accomplished with trust between students, teachers, and principals.

When Black youth are feeling unsafe in school (see Oba, 2020), feelings of mistrust as well as disconnected from their teachers and curriculum, it is not surprising that they would be

disconnected and disengaged from learning and school. When considering Black students' experiences of education within the broader context of power structures as CRT suggests, educators, principals and policy makers need to develop a better understanding of what Black students need to encourage engagement in learning. In order to do this, Black students must be consulted and provided opportunities to share what is best for them. These types of strategies promote relationship building between Black students and their teachers while simultaneously challenging the power dynamic embedded in the system by allowing Black student voices to not only be heard but also represented.

Further, the topic of whiteness in schools emerges again in one participant's discussion about the erasure of race in their schools. Chika shared "My school... tried to make race seem like it doesn't exist...It's kind of like a utopia, where everyone is equal and everything". But she continued to explain that although "race is something that in my school people tried to avoid talking about, [...] it's very real". Dei (2003) notes that denial around racism tends to emerge as a type of taboo in the classroom. The less that is said about race, the better for the students (ibid). While not all three participants directly spoke about the erasure of race in discourse, they all alluded to the fact that race needs to be more present in the curriculum and staff representation.

For instance, Chika shared, "In terms of how the school is and how everything was run it's like very white centred... I would say there aren't a lot of things that represent Black people. It was very white centred". In my interview with Daisy, she also noted: "There was no culture whatsoever at that school. It was literally, you wake up, you go to class, you learn and then you go home". This alludes to how whiteness has been normalized as the dominant culture in education. In Daisy's case, she not only described her school as having no representation of her own Nigerian culture, but also no other cultural representation aside from white. Since education

as an institution has fundamental roots in whiteness, it is difficult for students of colour to feel a sense of belonging within their schools and the curriculum. The dominance of white culture and curriculum is widely discussed in the literature. Anucha et al. (2017) discuss “how the curriculum and lesson plans- which exclusively focus on Eurocentric values, history, and worldviews- devalue, belittle and erase Black identities, cultures and histories (p. 30). Moreover, my interviews also illustrate how discipline intersects with and can exacerbate Black students disconnect and disengagement from learning. Upon returning from her suspension, Daisy describes how she felt even less engaged with the materials she was learning at school. So, not only are Black students feeling disconnected from the materials they are presented with in schools (Anucha et al., 2017), their experiences with exclusionary discipline further perpetuates their disengagement.

Race is a major component of one’s identity and disregarding the topic altogether will continue to harm racialized students and their understanding of the world, including one’s self. When race is turned into a taboo subject, this limits the space to discuss racialized students' very real experiences not only in the classroom but in the larger society. This framing of race as a taboo subject continues to uphold white supremacist ideologies in education by simply avoiding the topic altogether. Dei (2003) notes that students are racially coded whether educators can admit this or not. This is crucial to the discussion of students' engagement or lack thereof in education, as race and difference continue to “provide the context for power and domination” (ibid, p. 248). In short, it is critical to situate students' personal experiences within the broader structures of whiteness and power within the education system in order to acknowledge, interrogate, and dismantle existing racial hierarchies and their impacts on Black students in school.

Challenging the Concept of Resilience

One of my original research questions focused on exploring resilience and how Black students demonstrate resilience by overcoming hardships in the education system. However, over the course of this study, my analysis developed and changed focus. In our interviews, when I asked students to speak to the types of strategies that they used to cope with or adapt to educational barriers and disengagement, all three participants shared that they did not really cope, rather they learned how to survive. This is an important distinction, and it provides the basis for this section. For instance, consider participants' descriptions of survival. For Nathan, “high school was definitely survival. It was not for the weak”. When asked about coping mechanisms Nathan replied:

“One of the motto’s I grew up with was just these are the cards you’ve been dealt with, you just got to make the most out of your hand... There’s not really much you can do. I can’t really get upset or I’ll be playing into the typical stereotype of an angry Black teenager or what not. So, it was kind of one of those things where you just had to accept it for what it is.”

Both Daisy and Chika noted that to survive in their schools, they felt they had to become someone they are not. In Chika’s words:

I learned that I have to be someone that I’m not. I coped by just going with it and not questioning anything... since we already have a bad reputation, adding more to it is not very good. So, I just learned to be someone that I wasn’t [...] It’s very frustrating because I don’t know how to express myself. It’s always like you know, you have to be this certain way. The school doesn’t like that, so you have to do this [...] I feel like I’m in a cage most of the time because I can’t really express myself.

Like Chika, Daisy also commented:

It was like this school was like just this building where once you get in you have to turn into a robot [...] Every time I went to that school, I didn't really feel welcomed. I didn't feel very good about myself every time I was there. So, it was like I had to put on this mask and become this generic student who has no personality whatsoever. Just sits down in class, learns, and goes home.

Following her suspension, Daisy described feeling like she could no longer express herself as a Nigerian student, but rather only as an 'average' student. She provides a number of examples of interactions with her teachers, including be asked to stop wearing Nigerian beads in class. She notes that expressing her Nigerian identity had never been an issue before she was suspended but following her suspension, she had many experiences where she was asked to be repress her cultural knowledge and expression; to become someone other than who she really was.

While participants all noted that they were in survival mode throughout their time in secondary school, two participants shared that it was their fellow Black or POC peers that they turned to for support. Nathan, from the very start of our interview to the very end, referenced his friends. He shared stories about hardships they faced, the labelling they experienced as a group, as well as how they built trust amongst each other. Nathan notes that he built a type of alliance with his friends, who were some of the only people Nathan discussed he was able to trust at his school, especially because they were experiencing these things together.

Chika shared that she discussed her fear of discipline amongst her fellow Black peers. She noted "It was something that we were always afraid of." Chika discussed that her fellow Black peers could relate to her experiences with her VISA in ways that others could not. As previously mentioned, Chika did not feel that her teachers understood the complexities of the

situation with her VISA, let alone the fear she felt regarding it. It was her Black peers who she turned to discuss these concerns. Daisy did not explicitly discuss receiving support from other POC, she shared that her friends were some of the only other POC in her predominantly white school and that they did experience some things together.

Using the insights of CRT, it is apparent that participants' descriptions of survival are shaped and constrained by the climate of “whiteness” in their schools. When Black students’ experience racial profiling and feelings of disconnect in school and with their learning, withstanding these challenges often involves becoming someone they are not to succeed in white dominated classroom settings. Participants describe feelings of not belonging, being required to restrict expressions of self and culture, an inability to find space to cope with feelings, and the necessity of adhering to whiteness as the cultural ideal within schools. These findings are consistent with other studies. As Ladson-Billings (2021) notes "schooling often asks children to be something or someone other than who they really are. It asks them to use language other than the one they come to school with. It asks them to dismiss their community and cultural knowledge. It erases the things that the students hold dear” (cited in Odom Pough, 2021, p. 24).

While Black students are undoubtedly resilient, it is essential that we shift the focus from their ability to withstand these hardships to move towards unpacking *why* they must combat these hardships in the first place. “The focus should not be on helping marginalized and oppressed Black students develop more resilience. Instead, we must address the oppressive systems and policies that have directly caused Black students to be marginalized” (School Mental Health Ontario, 2020, p. 6). As Carl James notes, using the idea of resilience when approaching Black students’ educational experiences is extremely dangerous because it leads to students becoming trapped in the idea that they can come back from anything (in Daair &

Srivastava, 2021). He notes this type of thinking groups Black students together as a collective that can combat whatever is thrown at them (ibid). Srivastava further notes “We’ll always be fine no matter what you throw at us. The poisoned water is fine. We’ll just boil it. We’re resilient” (cited in Daair & Srivastava, 2021, 25:02,). This mentality shifts the focus from policy reform and making real change, to Black students themselves and their ability to withstand anything. This placement of blame on Black students appears to be a common trend throughout the literature. As previously mentioned, the literature suggests that there is emphasis placed on individual students’ success or failure within the education system rather than on schools’ ability to guide students (Levinsky, 2016). This continued pressure on Black students, as opposed to the institution, results in failing to address the real systemic concerns that exist in the education system.

Limitations

One of the most serious limitations of this project was participant recruitment. Given the timeframe in which this study unfolded, it was especially difficult to recruit participants once I received Ethics clearance from Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research and Ethics Board, as this brought my recruiting timeframe into the summer months. I circulated my recruitment materials to the Laurier undergraduate community through email listservs, Laurier’s learning management system for undergraduate courses (MyLearningSpace), and through my personal accounts on social media platforms (via Instagram and Facebook). Through the summer months, I recruited only 1 participant. This is likely due to students taking time away from school during these months and not checking their emails or MyLearningSpace course pages. By extending the project into the fall semester, I was able to recruit an additional 2 students.

Another possible limitation throughout the study was participants' willingness to disclose their experiences with suspensions and expulsions. It is likely that individuals who considered participating in the project did not wish to disclose this information as it is quite personal information. It may also be the case that students who were suspended or expelled did not pursue higher education. This possibility would have impacted recruitment to participate in the study because the criteria to participate required individuals to have both been suspended or expelled from an Ontario secondary school as well as have attended post-secondary school at some point. Individuals that reached out to learn more about this study indicated that they knew folks who met most of the criteria, except for attending post-secondary school. Unfortunately, this meant that these folks were ineligible to participate.

There were also unique limitations to this research surrounding COVID-19. While conducting interviews via Microsoft Teams presented some benefits, there were certain limitations to this approach as well. Not all participants knew about Microsoft Teams or how to use it. Using online software, like Teams, can restrict participation from those who do not have access to a computer or to reliable internet. Because most of my participants are current students who use the program relatively often, these were not major concerns. However, online interviews may have restricted the participant pool in general. Participants also may have found difficulties locating a private location in which they could conduct the interview (e.g., away from family or roommates). Additionally, COVID-19 has led to major zoom fatigue as individuals are exhausted from constant screen use. This may have impacted potential participants' desire to engage in the study.

Conclusion

Interest surrounding race, educational disengagement and discipline are certainly not new. While there is significant literature surrounding race, discipline and education in Canada, there remains sparse data on students' self-understandings of these experiences. As such, my research objectives were interested in better understanding Black students' subjective experiences of exclusionary discipline as well as better understanding the strategies Black students use to overcome barriers in education. I aimed to better understand how Black students make sense of and give meaning to their experiences of exclusionary discipline and educational disengagement in Ontario school boards. While there is rich literature on race, exclusionary discipline and educational disengagement, the data largely focuses on policy reviews and perspectives from authority figures such as policy makers and principals. The existing studies that interact with students directly tend to focus on their educational outcomes rather than their self-understandings of educational disengagement. Further, these studies often discuss the *negative* outcomes of educational disengagement. Thus, it was my goal to not only contribute to the literature by filling these gaps, but also to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding Black students and discipline by illuminating the hard work and dedication Black students demonstrate despite the hardship they continuously face.

Altogether, my study revealed that whiteness in education continues to operate as the overarching strain on Black students' educational experiences. This was not only consistent across the literature reviewed in this study, but also through participants' discussions of their experiences. It became clear that racial profiling continues to impact Black students' educational outcomes as well as shape and constrain student educator interactions and relationships. Additionally, my study demonstrates that when students are disengaged from school through

exclusionary discipline, they experience negative consequences. These negative consequences, for instance, impact students' desire to be in school as well as their relationships with teachers and principals. Finally, the data demonstrates that Black students are unable to find ways to cope with racial discrimination when dealing with exclusionary discipline, rather they have to find ways to survive.

To conclude, I present suggestions moving forward. One suggestion that all three participants spoke about was better training/education for the staff. Daisy suggested having a few mandatory courses that staff must take on culture to promote cultural awareness. She emphasized that it is not enough to just learn about one culture, but rather, teachers need to be informed on many cultures as this will likely be represented in their classrooms. Chika similarly notes that teacher education would be helpful. She describes that an opportunity for teachers to practice and demonstrate progress could be by addressing students by their real name. She shares that it is important to call folks by their real names and even though it may be hard at first to learn names, it really would make a difference. Nate focused his suggestion more on training teachers on how to approach Black students. He shared that in his experience he felt that the staff approached him differently than his peers. He notes "They would approach us like... we're about to do something wrong". Nathan explained that if teachers had better training this would hopefully create a more open space where real inviting conversations could take place between student and teacher.

When asked about what would have helped him as a student, Nathan shared that having a safe place and person to talk to would have been beneficial. He shares that having someone who he could openly talk to without fear of retribution would have really helped. He notes:

"Everyone has their own battles at home that they're fighting. So I know that not just me alone but my friends were having their own battles at home too. So instead of

always assuming that people are angry, or always emotional or whatnot... having an outlet for these emotions would have gone a long way.”

Chika discussed that addressing that race exists is essential to creating a safe learning environment. Rather than treating school like a utopian dream where all students are treated equally, it is important to acknowledge the very real experiences of students of colour.

Acknowledging that race exists is the absolute minimum a school can do to move towards race equity.

Through my research, it was my hope that my findings would contribute to the existing literature on educational disengagement by emphasizing Black students’ experiences within the Ontario education system. My intentions are that these findings will be helpful in shifting school policy and practices away from exclusionary discipline/punishment towards strategies that are inclusive and empowering of all students and focused on addressing equity issues both in and out of schools and classrooms (see Dei, 2003). Rather than disengaging students through removal methods such as suspensions and expulsions, I hope that my research will show that inclusive educational strategies pose more success in the future. Through the very personal stories shared by participants it is clear that students are still experiencing disengagement in the classroom. It is my hope that by adding these findings to the larger literature surrounding disengagement, policy makers and educators will continue to work on anti-oppressive work in their classrooms.

As discussed, Black students have very impactful recommendations that they believe would have really supported their learning and educational experiences and believe that they will help future students succeed. I hope that these suggestions are genuinely taken into consideration by anyone who engages with my work.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Overarching Themes:

1. Students *understanding* and experiences of educational disengagement within the Ontario School Board (suspensions and expulsions)
2. Student's experiences surrounding reintegration to the classroom
3. Student's resiliency to educational disengagement

Questions:

General/Background Educational Experience

1. How did you find your overall experiences in high school?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your relationships with your teachers and/or principles in high school?

One of the criteria of this interview is that you've experienced disciplinary action in school, I'm assuming that this happened to you. Is this true? I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about this.

1. What it was like being suspended or expelled from school.
2. What was the context around this suspension or expulsion?

Understanding Educational Disengagement

1. How do you think that experience (through suspensions and/or expulsions) impacted your educational experiences? In other words, do you think being suspended/expelled had an impact on your learning or desire to learn or be in school?
2. How do you think your racial identity shaped your experience of discipline at school?
3. Do you think your experience with [being suspended or expelled] led to any other barriers or experiences of discrimination at school? Can you tell me a bit more about these?
4. Did your experience of suspension and expulsion have any other impacts on your personal life, maybe with your well-being or your relationships with friends or family?

Resiliency

1. What did you learn from the experience of being suspended/expelled?
 - a. What type of strategies did you use to cope with this type of disciplinary action in high school?
2. How has this lesson impacted or shaped your relationship with learning and attending university today (or in the past)?
3. Based on your answers above... What factors contributed to your decision to go to university, despite your experienced of racial discrimination in school and being suspended and/or expelled?

- a. You already talked to me a little bit about anti-Black (use their language) can you tell me a little bit more about the factors that helped you go to university (i.e., family support, personal motivation, etc.) despite being subjected to racism in high school
4. How has this lesson impacted or shaped your relationship with learning and attending university today?