

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

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Abstract: Despite evidence suggesting that out of school suspensions do more harm than good, they remain prevalent in education system. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, 33,030 secondary school students were suspended during the 2017-2018 academic year. These students are at an increased risk for future suspensions and are less likely to complete secondary school. This study aimed to document, analyze and interpret the lived experience of youth who have been suspended one or more times from an Ontario secondary school and hear their voices. The data for this narrative inquiry was collected through three in depth semi-structured interviews with each one of the three participants. Participants shared about their aspirations, feelings of being ignored and excluded, their experiences with childhood adversity, and parental support and expectations. Using a temporal-needs threat model of ostracism, the findings can help to increase our understanding of youths' experiences.

Keywords: suspension, exclusionary discipline, ostracism, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Despite empirical evidence suggesting that out of school suspensions do more harm than good, they are still commonplace in our education system (Rosenbaum, 2018). In Ontario, 5.02% of secondary school students, equating to 33,030 individuals, were suspended during the 2017-2018 academic year (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2019). Notably, the suspension rate for secondary school students outpaces that of their elementary counterparts, who stand at 1.87% (OME, 2019). In Ontario, exclusionary discipline includes suspensions and expulsions. Suspensions are defined as a practice where a student is temporarily removed and prohibited from school property. A suspension must be given for a specific number of days ranging from one to 20 school days and is used as a measure to manage misbehaviour, as defined by the school. Once the suspension is complete, the student can return to school. Expulsions, in contrast, remove a student from a specific school for an indefinite amount of time and are considerably less common. In the 2017- 2018 academic year, only 0.04% of secondary school students were expelled (OME, 2019).

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

The OME has acknowledged that the use of suspensions can be harmful, and action needs to be taken to reduce suspensions (OME, 2012). In 2009, the OME changed their disciplinary policies to reduce the number of students being suspended and to allow principals to use their professional discretion. Prior to this change, in the 2007-2008 academic year, 7.82% of all secondary school students were suspended. In 2020, further reforms targeted younger students, from kindergarten to grade three. Although suspension rates have declined for both elementary and secondary school students, problem behaviours, such as violence in the classroom, are on the rise (Santor et al, 2019). Santor and colleagues (2019) released concerning statistics highlighting the rising level of students engaging in violent behaviour towards educators in Ontario elementary schools. It is evident that there is a large multi-faceted issue. Although suspension rates have decreased a few percentage points over the last decade, tens of thousands of students continue to be suspended, and behavioural problems, such as violence in the classroom, are escalating. This necessitates the need to examine suspensions through the lens of those directly affected.

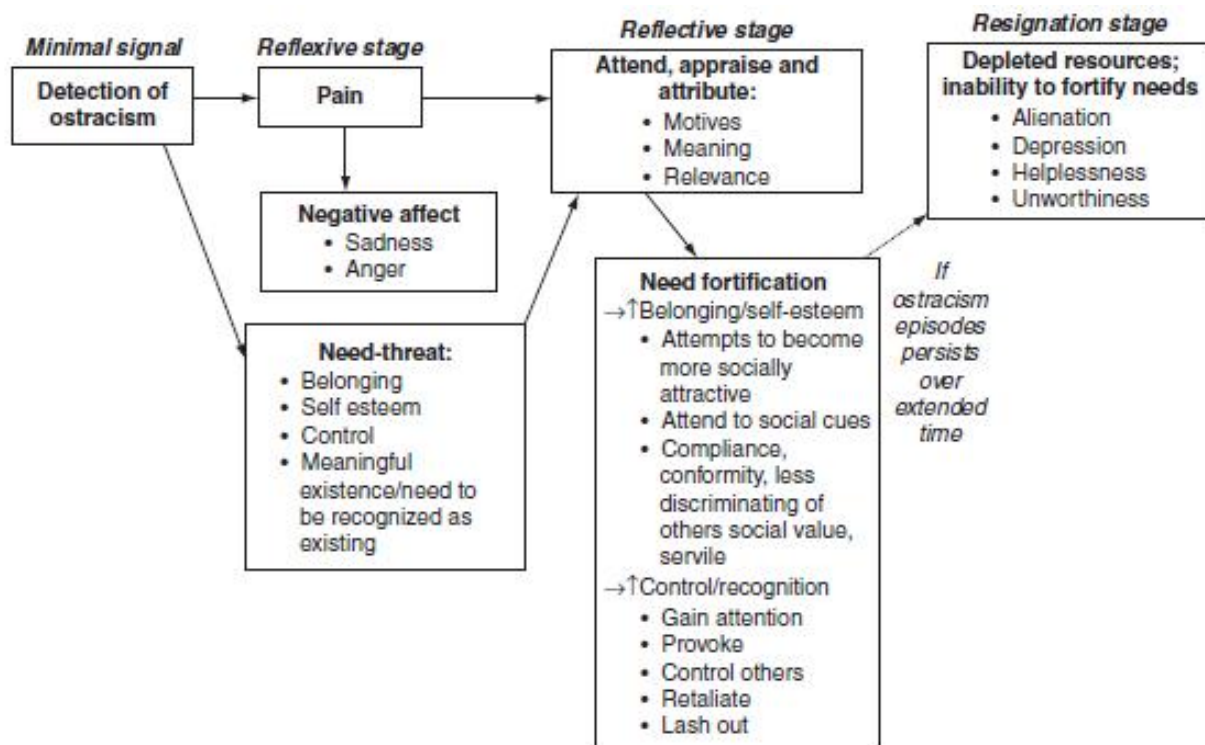
The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to document, analyse and interpret the lived experiences of Ontario's second school youth who have undergone one or more suspensions. By understanding their experiences, this research can help elicit change in the way discipline is managed in schools.

Ostracism

Suspension in and of itself is a form of exclusionary discipline that ostracizes the offending student; so regardless of all other factors, experiences of ostracism is a reality for any student who is suspended. Williams' (2009) *Temporal Needs-Threat Model of Ostracism* framework, seen in Figure 1, outlines three stages a person goes through when experiencing ostracism and the four basic psychological needs at risk. Williams (2009) lists our four basic psychological needs as belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. The first of three stages in the temporal need-threat model of ostracism is the immediate or reflexive stage. This is characterized by the immediate and natural emotional pain someone feels when they are rejected. In the moment, the basic psychological need of belonging and self-esteem is threatened. After the incident, a person moves into the second stage known as reflective or coping stage. The person reflects on the ostracism they experienced and evaluates the context, meaning, and relevance. The subsequent reaction a person will have is dependent on how the person interprets the incident. If the person evaluates the ostracism as irrelevant or minor, there may be little to no reaction. Alternatively, if they feel the ostracism does threaten their needs of belonging and self-esteem the person will act and or cope in ways that attempt to strengthen their threatened needs.

Figure 1

New Temporal Need-Threat Ostracism Model (Williams 2009)



An individual's initial attempt to cope is to try and strengthen their sense of belonging and self esteem. This is often done through engaging in likeable behaviours, such as being compliant, cooperative, friendly, or humorous. However, if this repeatedly fails, and they continue to experience ostracism, they may begin to feel that it is impossible for them to be included, and subsequently, their feelings of control and meaningful existence become threatened. Then the coping response to ostracism becomes an attempt to strengthen their sense of control and meaningful existence or visibility. This often manifests as aggressive and antisocial behaviour. Although this often further perpetuates experiences of ostracism, it gives the person a sense of control and forces others to recognize them. Lastly, the third stage, resignation, may occur if the ostracism is chronic, and sustained over time. The person's ability to cope is reduced and the person is likely to experience feelings of alienation, depression, and

helplessness. At this stage people may accept the message that they simply do not belong and are insignificant (Williams 2009).

The effects of ostracism have been extensively studied (Twenge et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2000; Zadro et al., 2006). Ostracism is a common, yet painful experience most people can relate to (Williams, 2007). Even in short, clinical experiments, ostracism has shown to be immensely powerful (Williams et al., 2000; Zadro et al., 2006). These findings suggest that people with social anxiety can be more vulnerable to ostracism, and that people who are experiencing ostracism are more likely to detect ostracism in ambiguous situations. Further, studies document that people can react in two distinct ways to ostracism. One reaction is to promote inclusion such as through conforming or acting in likeable ways (Williams & Sommer, 1997; Williams et al., 2000), and the alternative reaction is to respond with aggression and antisocial behaviour (Twenge et al., 2001; Warburton et al., 2003). Results from an additional study by Chow et al. (2008) suggest that there is an important link between ostracism, anger, and antisocial behaviour.

Methods

Three young adults aged between 18 and 24 were recruited purposely. This age range was chosen because they did not require parental permission to participate, and because these students would have been in secondary school when the current Progressive Discipline policy was in use. For reference, the 2009-2010 academic year was the first entire school year where each school board was required to have a Progressive Discipline Policy. This policy followed the Safe Schools Act that mandated “zero-tolerance” to removed from all policy documents and gave principals more autonomy regarding the decision to suspend students (Bill 212, 2007). All three participants had been suspended at least once during their time in a publicly funded Ontario secondary school.

Recruitment sites included adult and continuing education schools, youth social service organizations and online communities. The three participants that were involved in this study will be referred to as Ethan, Jax, and Caleb. All participants were currently residing in the same, medium-sized city. At the time of the study, Ethan was 23, homeless, and had recently put his university program on hold. Ethan was raised by his grandparents until he entered the foster care system at 15. Ethan then lived in group homes and in a family placement until he moved out on his own at 17. At the time of the interviews, Ethan was working towards graduating secondary school and working full time hours. Ultimately, he dropped out of school because he could not financially afford to lose hours at work. Ethan returned to an alternative education program two years later and graduated secondary school. He had completed approximately two years worth of college and university since.

Jax was 20 years old at the time of our interviews and had been recently released from a local detention centre. Jax was raised by his biological mother until he was nine years old, at which time he was placed in a foster home. The foster family later became Jax’s adoptive family. Once Jax turned 18, he stopped attending school and he did not graduate with his secondary school diploma.

Lastly, Caleb was 18 at the time of our interviews and was nearly finished with secondary school. Caleb had already graduated secondary school but returned for an extra semester to better prepare himself for college. Caleb’s family is the family that adopted Jax, the other participant. Although Caleb and Jax are not biologically related, they shared a home and the same family structure for many years and refer to each other as brothers.

The participants represented some demographics that face suspensions disproportionately. All of them were male diagnosed with ADHD. Jacob also identified he had a specific learning disability. Ethan and Jax were raised in less than two parent homes and were both involved in the foster care system. Being male, having a special education designation, and living in a less than two parent home are all categories of people who are overrepresented in school suspension (Zheng, 2019). The geographic area in which recruitment took place is a predominately white, mid-sized city in Eastern Ontario.

Participants each took part in three semi-structured interviews that focused on their current circumstances, experiences with suspensions, and experiences in their earlier school years. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share any other stories they felt were important. Participants’ second and third interviews were spaced at a minimum one week apart. This timeline was used to allow time for reflection and transcription. The subsequent interview questions were adjusted and tailored to each individual while maintaining a

similar structure. The adjustment was made to allow space for follow up questions and to revisit previous discussions. Further, participants were invited to participate in member checking of the interview transcripts that were shared with them; however, there were no changes requested.

For data analysis, constant comparative analysis was used to inductively form codes, categories, and then themes that represent similar meanings (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). We used open coding following the initial read of the transcripts and “clipped” units of meaning which usually took the form of sentences. These “clipped” units were isolated from the transcripts and a descriptive label was attached. These descriptive labels became the codes. We re-read the transcripts to look for missed codes, and then grouped similar codes into categories. Lastly, we used thematic coding to create themes that further summarized the categories. The themes that emerged connected the participants unique experiences through place, time and relationships.

Results

The participants’ Ethan, Jax and Caleb, shared stories that were incredibly unique and concurrently extraordinarily similar. The participants were candid – boldly telling stories of painful experiences and excitedly sharing their accomplishments and aspirations. Two themes, *Aspirations* and *Ignored and Excluded*, emerged in all three participants’ narratives. A third theme of *Childhood Adversity* emerged for Ethan and Jax, while a fourth theme of *High Parental Support and Expectations* was unique to Caleb.

Aspirations

Ethan, Jax, and Caleb all talked about their hopes for their futures in varying ways throughout our interviews. All three participants were experiencing times of uncertainty and aspired for greater things in life. The participants all had an image of what they longed for in the future and their aspirations were greatly influenced by their life experiences. Some of the aspirations expressed by participants were paralleled with specific goals and plans of how to achieve their longings. On the contrary, some aspirations were met simply with a burning desire to flourish and lacked clear goals or plans. The aspirations each participant shared had been a driving force in their life. For Ethan, the foundational goal of “getting an education” to leave a life of poverty behind has fueled his decisions. Ethan explained, “I was always one who like actually wanted to like you know graduate, and I wanted to like get an education because like I didn’t want to end up like, like my grandma or grandpa.” Ethan lived with the repercussions of his grandparents’ behaviours as a child and knew he wanted more for himself as an adult. Although Ethan had been facing challenging barriers to his success, he was still determined to work towards the future he dreamt of. Alternatively, Jax’s aspirations have been less consistent over the years, but he is driven now by a powerful force. Jax’s infant daughter is now his motivation to get his life on track. Jax described that “...everything’s changed. I don’t know, like the way I look at life is different. I don’t know, all that stupid corny shit they tell you about like having kids...its all true.” Jax also explained how his biological father was never a part of his life, and how he is determined to be the opposite of his absent father. Jax knew what he wanted for himself and his daughter, and he was making decisions to start building the future he dreamt of. Lastly, Caleb had held the specific goal of attending post-secondary school from a young age. This goal helped Caleb stay focused and motivated academically. Caleb knew he would need to stop being suspended in order to stay on track with his educational goals. Caleb watched his brother, Jax, face the consequences of his actions, and Caleb knew that his plans would be derailed if he did not change. Caleb said, “It’s definitely helped me avoid a lot by knowing what’s going to happen if I do”, referring to watching Jax, his brother, head down a troublesome path. The aspirations the participants shared have motivated them and helped them to make decisions along the way.

Additionally, these aspirations were formed, in part by negative experiences. All three participants understood what life may be like if they did not consciously work towards their goals. Ethan intimately understood what living in poverty was like because he lived it when he was under his grandparents’ guardianship. Jax understood what it was like to grow up without knowing his birth father. Caleb understood how if he continued to down the same path as his brother Jax, his educational goals would be beyond his reach. Ethan, Jax, and Caleb all knew what they wanted for themselves, and knew from firsthand experience, specifically what they did not want. The participants’ aspirations were not just what they were working towards; they were also aspirations to *not be* something. Despite the circumstances that participants found themselves in, they all clearly identified what they wanted their future to look like and what they did not want it to look like.

Ignored and Excluded

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

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

Childhood Adversity, and Parental Support and Expectations

In Ethan and Jax's interviews, the theme of childhood adversity arose, whereas in Caleb's narrative, the final theme was one of parental support and high expectations. Ethan and Jax's early lives included turbulent circumstances and they had biological parent(s)/guardian(s) who struggled to meet their basic needs. Both Ethan and Jax struggled as children with food insecurity and both entered the foster care system. Beyond their early years, Ethan and Jax continued to face great adversity and accumulated numerous barriers, including involvement with the youth justice system. Although Caleb described adversity, such as being bullied, the adversity he described was less pervasive in his life than in Ethan and Jax's narratives. When Caleb explained difficult circumstances, like being bullied, he also explained how he felt supported and encouraged by his parents. Caleb felt that his parents were able to advocate for him and that they held him to high expectations. These experiences of feeling supported for Caleb seemed to overpower the experiences of adversity in his life which is why it emerged as a theme. Although Jax and Caleb lived in the same household and shared the same set of parents for many years, Jax had a very different experience. Both Caleb and Jax explained that they were required by their mother to do schoolwork and chores when they were at home because of suspensions. For Caleb, this was effective, and helped keep him on track with his academics. Jax on the other hand would become frustrated and angry when he was told to do chores and schoolwork. Jax said that this often led him to spiral out of control, and he would then have to face more consequences at home, such as being grounded in his room. Jax described throughout the interviews that he felt he was supported by his adoptive parents, but it did not seem that it mitigated his challenging behaviour. For Jax, the adversity he experienced outweighs his experiences of parental support.

Discussion

The participants' circumstances varied widely, falling predominantly into two categories – favourable and adverse. Both Ethan and Jax's circumstances were adverse– they were facing extreme challenges. Ethan and Jax were both struggling with financial security, employment, and housing, and desperately wanted to change their situation. On the contrary, Caleb's circumstances are considered favourable. He was finishing his secondary school experience on a positive note and anticipating the start of post-secondary education. Ethan and Jax's experiences with suspension and subsequent post-school negative outcomes is reflected and well documented in empirical studies (Rosenbaum, 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Arcia, 2006). Although participants did not directly attribute their current circumstance to their suspensions, it is clear that suspensions added additional barriers to their lives. Namely, they lost opportunities and were further exposed to their existing vulnerabilities. Overall, suspensions did not benefit Ethan, Jax or Caleb, and all three participants attested to the immediate negative impacts that resulted from suspensions. Suspensions created additional risk factors for the youth that are linked to poor outcomes later in life.

Although suspensions cannot be decisively labelled as the cause of these outcomes, suspensions can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and risk factors.

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

Williams’ (2009) temporal need-threat model of ostracism provides some valuable perspective for Ethan, Jax, and Caleb’s experiences. Their stories directly reflected both the basic psychological needs that were threatened, as well as their progression through the stages of the model. Each experienced the emotional pain of ostracism, likely feeling that their sense of belonging and self-esteem was threatened. In response, the attempt to fortify the need of control and meaningful existence was often attempted through antisocial behaviour, including drug use, truancy, association with deviant-acting peers, and retaliation to bullying. These experiences of ostracism in elementary school led these individuals to engage in behaviours that would ultimately further ostracize them. Jax and Ethan described a sense of alienation, signalling the resignation phase of Williams’ (2009) model. Both admitted that they had maintained little contact with people they once had relationships with, including family and friends. Fortunately for Caleb, when he began secondary school, his basic needs were restored. Caleb was able to meet new people, and his humorous and friendly personality attracted friends. Caleb was able to fortify his basic needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence in this new environment. Caleb finally felt included and was able to maintain this sense of belonging in his community. There is no reason to believe that Caleb entered the resignation stage in Williams’ (2009) need-threat model of ostracism.

Understanding these experiences carries significant implications for educators. Educators should increasingly look to reframe and understand their students and behaviours through a toxic stress, and ostracism lens. This can facilitate empathy and understanding from an adult perspective and create a buffering effect for the student and their response to stress and ostracism. By understanding the widespread impact of toxic stress on a developing child, educators can begin to understand how past experiences and a student’s lived experience influence current behaviour. Understanding this from a biological and developmental perspective may also help reduce an educator’s emotional response to student misbehaviour. This removal of personalization is imperative for an educator to respond appropriately and in a caring and supportive way that will not escalate anti-social behaviour. Further, educators must understand the impacts of ostracism, and consciously attempt to facilitate a sense of belonging and self-esteem in their students who are vulnerable. Adding extra emphasis on explicitly teaching social and emotional coping skills that promote a sense of inclusion and belonging should be considered to help students respond with adaptive, and pro-social behaviours. The fostering of healthy relationships, amongst students, and students and educators could help mitigate the feelings of ostracism and prevent maladaptive coping responses.

Conclusion

Focusing on a specific demographic of three males aged 18-23, this study has given voice to these participants who have not been able to widely share their stories. This demographic does not capture the full breadth of those affected by suspensions but offers a close examination of their experiences. In order to make change, the perspectives and the experiences of those most impacted by such policies, procedures and guidelines must be heard. The participant voices are powerful and highlight the need to seek understanding of more peoples experience with suspension. Based on the findings, it is imperative that we better understand the long-term impacts of ostracism as it relates to suspensions, and preventative measures to avoid aggressive and antisocial coping responses to ostracism. Additionally, it is important to better understand the impact toxic stress has on developing children and look to ways

to mediate the effect. Lastly, it is our hope that educators see the importance of re-framing how they see, interpret, and respond to behaviour. Understanding the impact of suspensions from a student's perspective can be the starting point for compassionate and informed responses.

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