



“I Won’t Even Lie, I Was Terrified”: Experiences of Adversity Among Students Who Have Been Suspended or Expelled



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Introduction

- A constructivist grounded theory study aimed to explore adverse experiences among students who are disciplinarily excluded in Ontario, Canada.
- This is a unique population not typically captured in traditional surveys, yet their insight is invaluable to understand the impact of violence and adversity on academic and justice system trajectories.

Background

- Black and Indigenous students, males, students with special education needs and those living in low SES communities are more likely to be suspended, suspended for longer periods, or to be expelled (James & Turner, 2017; Losen, 2015).

Disproportionate disciplinary exclusion is correlated with:



- Disproportionate academic outcomes influence disparate entry into post-secondary education and ultimately propel the **inequitable distribution of power, money and resources** (Worthington, 2012).
- The lack of attention to the role of adversity within disciplinary exclusion renders invisible the influence of these experiences potentially leading to the disproportionate disciplining of trauma** (Sanders, 2019, 2022; Sanders et al., 2021, In press).

Trauma: The sequela or impact of a traumatic experience.

Adverse Experiences: Harmful or threatening situations, or the absence of stimulation needed for typical development that can lead to trauma (Koss & Gunnar, 2018).

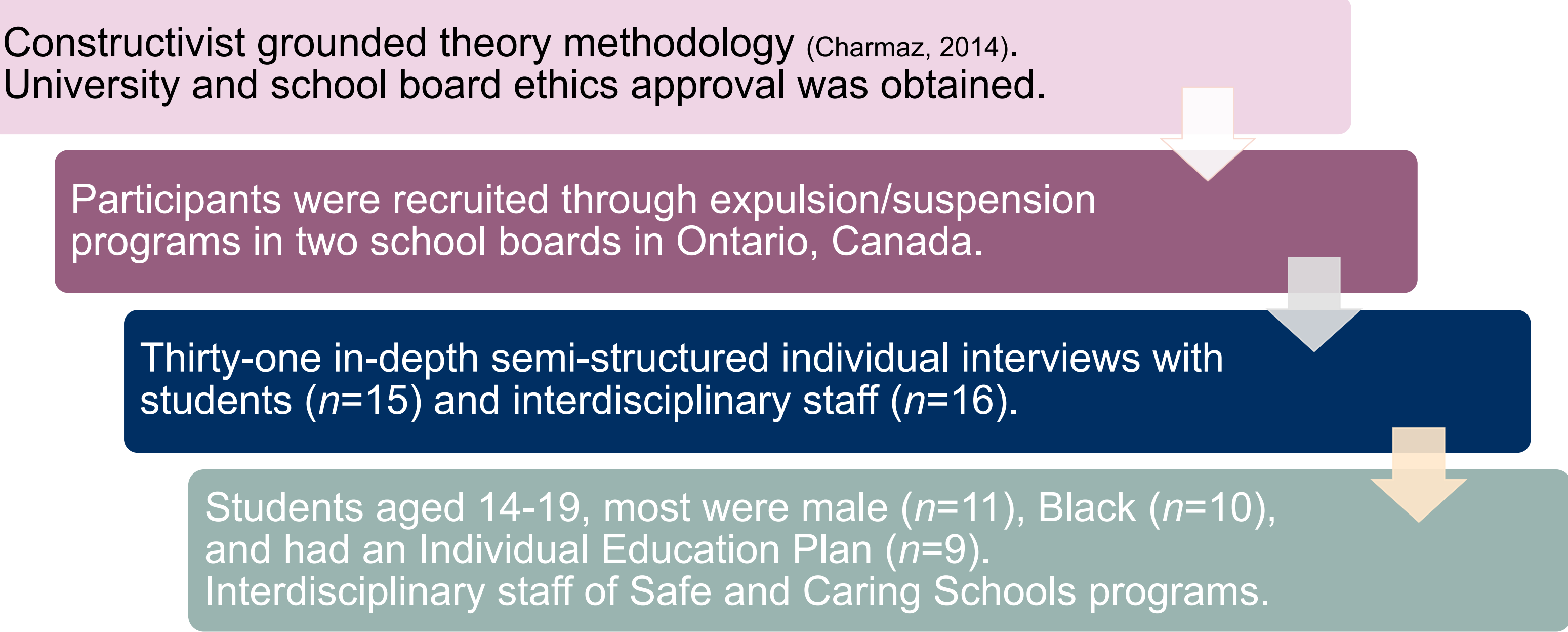
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; death of a parent; violence against mother; parental separation or divorce; or living with caregivers who misuse substances, experience mental illness or suicidal behaviour, or were ever imprisoned (Felitti et al., 1998).

Expanded ACEs: Peer victimization, isolation and rejection, exposure to school and community violence, experiencing racism, living in an unsafe neighborhood, close network member being seriously ill or attempting suicide, low socio-economic status, and having lived in foster-care (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2020).

The ways trauma or adversity is acknowledged/contextualised renders certain forms of trauma unrecognizable, for example racism and poverty (Alvarez et al., 2016).

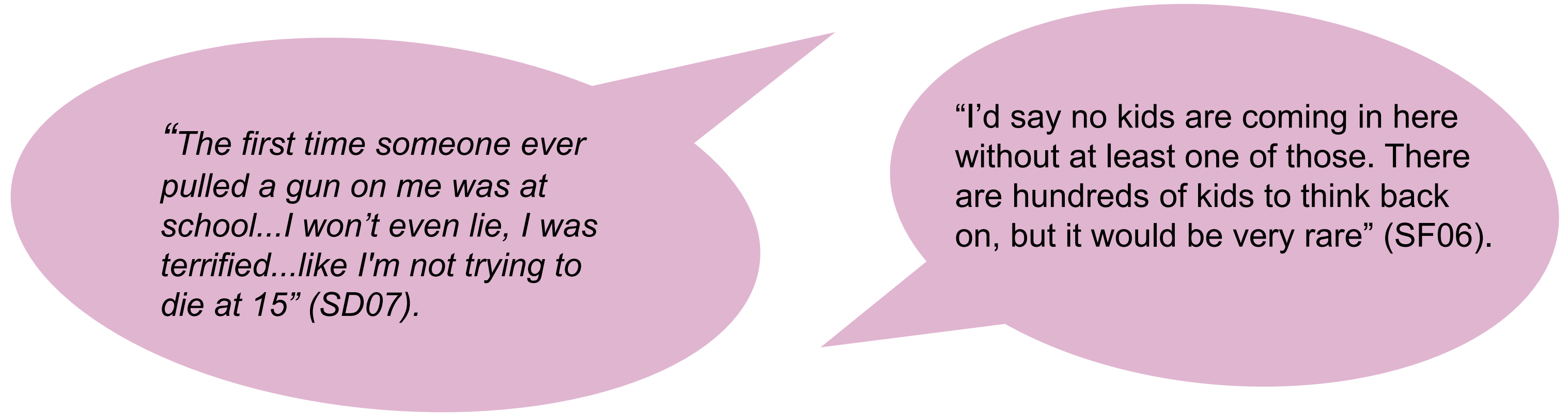
Methods

- Objective:** to explore experiences of adversity among students who have been suspended and expelled.
- Research Question:** What are the experiences of students who have been suspended or expelled related to exposure to adversity?
- Theoretical Foundation:** Critical intersectionality, trauma-informed care, expanded ACEs research.



Results

- 14 of the 15 student participants explicitly identified at **least 2 forms of adversity**.
- 9 student participants reported experiencing **3 or more forms of adversity**.
- 7 of the 15 student participants experienced **5 to 7 distinct forms of adversity**.
- In addition to conventional ACEs, two important subcategories of **expanded adversity** emerged: exposure to school and community violence, and systemic racism and inequity.



- This extremely high rate of adversity and polyvictimization was corroborated by the 16 staff participants.
- The results also indicate that **these experiences were often unacknowledged**.
- Moreover, after years of inadequate systemic responses to their experiences, students tended to mask vulnerability and minimize experiences of violence.

Not only does adversity affect an individual's social, emotional and neurological development; social identities are imposed on certain students based on social location, influencing how certain students are viewed, approached and supported within systems such as education.

Conclusions

- The findings indicate a high prevalence of adversity among disciplined students.
- Acknowledging adversity among students who have been disciplinarily excluded is a necessary step towards a systemic shift that supports this group of students as having experienced adversity rather than as perpetrators of adversity.
- Need for explicitly trauma-informed and culturally/race aware school and disciplinary approaches.
- Additional research on adversity within disproportionate disciplinary exclusion is needed.
- Call for consistent acknowledgement of expanded forms of adversity, particularly among this group of students, in research and practice.

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